

## The Return of the Old Guard: Boundary and Security Implications of the Congo War

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### Introduction

Nelson Mandela's dream of an African Renaissance that could unite the great wealth of Central and Southern Africa into a world-class regional trading bloc has been shattered. A dangerous brew of ethnic and political alliances has now split the members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) into opposition camps and threatens to engulf the entire region in war.<sup>1</sup>

The potential for a world class African trading region was not a pipe dream. The Congo alone includes: 80% of the world's cobalt, 20% of its copper and huge quantities of zinc, gold, tin, coal, industrial diamonds, oil, and uranium. It also includes huge virgin forests, enough hydroelectric potential to light up all of Africa, and water sufficient to quench drought-prone Southern Africa. All this was to be regionally linked through South African engineering and know-how. Open-border transport corridors would have relieved Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Botswana of their landlocked status. Depressed areas like Bujumbura could have been revived (picture a bustling port on Lake Tanganyika delivering ore, timber, and other goods directly to the South African rail network).

It was considered a diplomatic coup for a South African-led renaissance when rebel leader Laurent Kabila was installed as president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire) in May 1997. He was to offer a new brand of democratic leadership that fitted with this open market economy. The Congo's great wealth was formally tied into SADC when the DRC joined in August 1997.

Once in office, Kabila did not share power with all ethnic groups, party, and regional leaders, some of whom enjoyed a *de facto* autonomy in the past because of the internal disorganisation of Zaire. Instead he surrounded himself with ethnic groups friendly to him and offered them lucrative appointments. He then ordered the expulsion of Rwandans and followed this up with Tutsi hate rhetoric. He also helped to cover-up the genocidal campaigns that brought him to power. This was an intolerable affront to the promised new geopolitical

order. Within one year, the forces that put Kabila in power wanted him out.

Since 2 August, ethnic Tutsi militias, Uganda, Rwanda, some ex-Mobutu forces, dissident Congolese army troops, Angolan rebels (UNITA), Cabindan secessionists, rebel forces from Congo-Brazzaville (Lissouba's Zulu militia), Christian rebels in Sudan (SPLA) and certain mercenaries have engaged in military campaigns to oust Kabila. Anti-Kabila sympathisers by other means include Burundi, South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, the United States and divisive political factions within Zambia that keep it out of the war.

It is the military wing of the Congolese Rally for Democracy (CRD) made up of dissident Congolese troops and ethnic Tutsis that launched the offensive. In a two-week blitzkrieg from 2 August they moved on an Eastern and Western front to take a third of the Congo along the borders of Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi and to drive rapidly toward taking Kinshasa.

The CRD and military allies failed to anticipate a late August entry into the war by neighbouring states. On the verge of taking Kinshasa, the rebels were driven out of the west by battle-hardened Angolan troops. Air attacks in the East wiped out thousands of civilians, the worst hit being Kitona. On 12 October the rebels captured the strategic town of Kindu from the pro-Kabila forces. This offers an airport and a strategic corridor for taking the diamond-mining centre at Mbuja-Mayi and the gold fields of Kananga. If this next operation succeeds, it will allow them to fight a protracted war.

The pro-Kabila alliance includes military involvement by Zimbabwe (3,000 troops), the DRC, Namibia (600 troops), Angola (4,000 troops), Chad (1,000 troops) and Sudan (2,000 troops). Pro-Kabila sympathisers furnishing diplomatic or material assistance include: Congo-Brazzaville, the Central African Republic, Tanzania, Kenya, Libya, China, numerous ethnic militias, mercenaries, and some former Mobutu forces. At the time of writing, the pro-Kabila forces were moving towards

Kananga in anticipation of a rebel thrust in that direction. These moves include the deployment of tanks, warplanes and MI-24 and MI-25 combat helicopters. This constitutes a considerable increase in firepower and a massive escalation in the conflict.

A review of the geopolitical actors is perhaps the best way to understand the forces reshaping the political landscape in Southern Africa and its implications for security and boundary issues. Reviewed first are those supporting Kabila. The alliance opposed to Kabila is then discussed.

### The Pro-Kabila Alliance

#### *Kabila's DRC*

Laurent Kabila is from the Luba tribe but last year he cleverly piggy-backed on a Tutsi-inspired revolution all the way to Kinshasa. Although he had his own ethnically-mixed militia, the principal fighting force was composed of ethnic Tutsis from the eastern Congo. It was this force, backed by Rwanda and Uganda that put Kabila in power. In May 1997 Kabila granted himself "*supreme power*" over the military, legislature, and executive of the new Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Kabila has neither the troop strength nor the loyalty to expel the rebels. This military dependency is his 'achilles heel'. Should Angola be persuaded to withdraw, the rebels would regain their strategic foothold in the West and then occupy Kinshasa.

#### *Angola*

This player is the key Kabila ally in terms of firepower. It has the tanks, artillery, aircraft and combat helicopters to outgun the rebels. The CRD suffered major losses when Angola entered the war on 22 August. Angola's main aim is to control the Congo-Angola border. This prevents their enemy, UNITA, from smuggling diamonds, establishing bases in the DRC, and attacking oil-rich Cabinda.

Angola may be less interested in propping up Kabila than protecting its borders. Under border-control guarantees from the anti-Kabila forces, Kabila could find himself without his key ally. If UNITA simultaneously steps up its activities, Angola may also jettison the Kabila cause to avoid spreading its troops too thinly. Several countries in the anti-Kabila alliance, including South Africa, have no fondness for UNITA so an agreement with Angola is a key part of opposition strategy.

#### *Congo-Brazzaville and the Central African Republic*

Both these states support Kabila but each has powerful rebel forces that are anti-Kabila. MPLA troops installed President Denis Sassou-Nguesso in power last year and Angolan arms keep him there. The ousted President Lissouba was a UNITA supporter and one of Kabila's enemies. His rebel 'Zulu' forces are now supporting the CRD. Their strongholds are along the Southern border from which they could launch an attack on either Kinshasa or move in a pincer movement with UNITA toward Cabinda. The rebels in the Central African Republic are aligned with former Mobutu army forces and are similarly poised for cross-border raids.

#### *Zimbabwe*

Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe patched together some SADC allies and entered the war without consulting his own parliament. Mugabe gambled his prestige, the state coffers, and 3,000 Zimbabwe troops on a bid to hijack the African Renaissance restoring Kabila. If successful, Mugabe's actions could wrest regional influence, wealth and power from South Africa and restore the order of the Old Guard.

Namibia, Tanzania, Angola, and Zimbabwe have the transport potential to redirect Congo's wealth out of South African hands and along their own corridors. Zimbabwe's defence industries, miners, and business interests would all benefit. Mugabe also has been encouraging Zimbabwean banks, mining houses and businesses to take the 'spoils of war' from those countries that failed to wade in with troops (i.e. South Africa and the United States).

President Robert Mugabe has gambled millions of dollars of cash and supplies in support of Kabila and at the expense of major reforms within Zimbabwe. If he fails to win in combat, he returns to face increasing unpopularity in a troubled country that can ill-afford a million-dollar-a-day war. Furthermore, without the support of Angola, Sudan, and other forces, the anti-Kabila rebels are certain to make advances that Zimbabwe's army cannot stop.

#### *Namibia*

President Sam Nujoma has sent 600 troops, armoured vehicles, helicopters and at least 21 tons of weapons to assist Kabila. If the war turns nasty it could conveniently enter the fray with an invasion of Botswana, with whom it has border disputes. That could have the effect of involving South Africa militarily. Namibia could also be destabilised by the war since much of its participation is based on President Nujoma's directives, without consultation with his cabinet or parliament. This, coupled with

Nujoma's efforts to change the constitution to allow him a third term as president is quickly dividing the country.

#### *Hutu Militias and Ethnic Factors*

Ethnicity is the most complex and unpredictable factor in the war. For decades former President Mobutu fostered ethnic hatreds and now Kabila is playing the same hand to get Hutus and other enemies of the Tutsis to attack the rebels. Reports from the battlefield indicate that other traditional ethnic enemies of the Tutsis (the Nandes, Wangilima, and Bashis of North Kivu and the Mai-Mai, and Bembes of South Kivu) are being supplied with sophisticated arms to assist in a new program of genocide.

This strategy could easily backfire. First, genocidal campaigns to exterminate the Tutsis will be strongly resisted. Uganda, Rwanda and ethnic Tutsis have already engaged these militias militarily. They are also engaged in talks aimed at swinging them over to the rebel cause. Kabila could see the state he seeks to rule collapse into tribal bids for territory. Secondly, the rebels can also exploit the ethnic factor. There are hostilities between Kabila's Luba tribe and many Katangans. If the latter allied themselves with the Tutsis, they could bring the mineral-rich zone (see map) into the Anti-Kabila camp. From this location they could either fund a drive toward Kinshasa or abandon the west to consolidate a new pro-Tutsi state.

#### *Sudan and Libya and Chad*

The involvement of these North African states presents the worst possible scenario. This could see battles ranging across the full extent of Africa and in a wider spectre give birth to a global conflagration since it attracts other stakeholders.

Libya and Sudan have a strong interest in reducing US influence in Africa. Additionally, Sudan seeks to neutralise Ugandan and US support for the Southern People's Liberation Army (SPLA) seeking to overthrow the Khartoum regime. Sudan supports three militias that launch cross-border raids into Uganda from the Congo (Lord's Resistance Army, Allied Democratic Army, West Nile Liberation Front).

Khartoum is increasing support for surrogate anti-Museveni rebels while Libya funded the movement of 2,000 Sudanese *mujahidin* to help tip the balance of the war against the CRD. This move could backfire by attracting US retaliation and the movement of Ugandan forces and allies toward the Sudanese border.

#### *Tanzania*

Tanzania diplomatically supported the Zimbabwe-led initiative to intervene militarily in the Congo but actually withdrew some troops stationed there after the conflict broke out. During Kabila's rise to power, Tanzania provided military training, logistical support, bomb-disposal units and troops. Now it appears to recognise that the brewing conflagration involves too many role-players to serve its long-term interests.

The Tanzanian wild card would be an invasion of Burundi if the war front moves eastwards towards the borders of Uganda and Rwanda. Tanzania has long assisted Hutu militias from Burundi (the FDD, Palipehutu, and Frolina) and many Hutus serve and have influence in Tanzania's army. Certain of them have long encouraged such an invasion. There is precedent too: Tanzania invaded Uganda in 1979 to remove Idi Amin and in November 1996 Tanzania warned of a potential invasion should Burundi's Tutsi-led troops attack rebels on its side of the border. Bringing the Hutu opposition to power in Burundi might lead to new declarations of war by Rwanda and Uganda.

#### *Kenya*

President Daniel Arap Moi, like Zimbabwe's Mugabe, is an 'Old Guard' African leader who is neither keen on Tutsis nor South Africa's new political leverage. Like Mugabe, Moi could gain diplomatic influence under the Kabila-Hutu alliance that is developing. President Moi has housed extremist Rwandan Hutu leaders in Nairobi, supported anti-Museveni rebels in the past, and helped champion sanctions against the Tutsi regime in Burundi. Since 1996, diplomatic relations have deteriorated rapidly between Kenya and both Uganda and Rwanda (e.g. Kenya closed the Rwandan embassy in July of that year). Moi could eventually enter the military fray but may be discouraged owing to growing discontent at home.

#### *China*

The West has always controlled the Congo's wealth – often through coups and armed intervention designed to prop up dictators like Mobutu. Economics and demographics suggest that China, already the third most powerful economy, will overtake the US to become the world's biggest global trader soon after the turn of the millennium. Few of the 'Old Guard' African leaders appear to accept the western ideology that economic liberalisation is inherently beneficial. Many would rather hinge their economies to this rising eastern star and the evolution of South-South alliances. This spells out an ultimate rejection of US influence



and the African states seen to be carrying out US policy (Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa, Eritrea).

China has already expanded its economic involvement in pro-Kabila states and *Africa Confidential* indicates it has been moving Chinese weapons toward Kabila via Mozambique and onto Lubumbashi. If the war intensifies and expands, so might Chinese involvement.

### The Anti-Kabila Alliance

#### *Congolese Rally for Democracy*

The CRD includes former high ranking officers in the Congolese Armed Forces (FAC), members of Kabila's own cabinet (e.g. the former foreign minister), break-away army regiments (including Kabila's key Zulu battalion), ethnic Tutsi militias from the eastern Congo and some former Zairean soldiers. It also has military support from Rwandan and Ugandan troops. The militia is led by a non-Tutsi dissident who once commanded Kabila's army, Commander Jean-Pierre Ondekane.

The CRD claims that Kabila failed to cede the eastern Congo province of Kivu to the ethnic Tutsis in exchange for placing him in power. They also say the CRD represents all Congolese in a fight for democracy. If only pitted against Kabila's loyal troops, a rebel victory is certain. Entry into the war by Angola and Zimbabwe reversed this fortune, driving back the rebels to their eastern Congo stronghold. A loss there might intensify the civil wars in both Rwanda and Burundi as rebel Hutu soldiers backed by the Kabila alliance invaded. This would extend the fighting in a continuous zone from Eastern Zaire to Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania to include a campaign of genocide against the Tutsis.

#### *Uganda and Rwanda*

These states seek border security, protection from genocidal campaigns against Tutsis, and an African Renaissance that relieves their landlocked status. Their security goal was laid bare in October 1996 with the rapid creation of a pro-Tutsi controlled strip of eastern Zaire from Uvira in the South to the Sudan border. Tutsi militias scattered all the opposition rebel forces launching cross-border raids into Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. Kabila failed to control this territory for the Tutsi alliance and soon these raids resumed.

Attempts to consolidate control of the eastern Congo could encounter resistance on the part of Tanzania, Kenya, and Hutu militias. Tanzania controls much of the present regional transport

network and is in competition with Uganda as a hegemon in the region. If backed by the combined forces of the pro-Kabila team, the Hutu militias in Rwanda and Burundi could gain ground and oversee the collapse of the Tutsi alliance (not unlikely – there are six Hutus for every Tutsi). Increased Sudanese support for Ugandan rebel militias could also furnish a strategy for diverting Ugandan and Rwandan troops onto a third front.

#### *South Africa*

South Africa played a key role in bringing Kabila to power by furnishing Rwanda with weaponry until late 1996 (just prior to the drive to oust Mobutu and install Kabila). South African support for Kabila subsequently became lukewarm. South Africa's proposal, following the Kabila victory in 1997, was to replace him and the entire alliance he led with a transitional authority. South Africa lost lucrative mining contracts to players who bid more diplomatically for the despot's favours.

A victory by the pro-Kabila alliance could see the death of a South African-driven renaissance through a loss of business opportunities. South Africa's rail company, Spoornet, already had a 51% share in the Congo railway network, Sizarail. Discussion had taken place regarding South African development of Zaire's vast hydroelectric potential. Water from the Zaire River was also to be tapped for thirsty Southern Africa.

With a Kabila-Mugabe alliance running the renaissance, South Africa could become as marginalised within Africa as it was under apartheid. It might have to forge its ties to extra-regional actors and beef up its border security (now rather porous). South Africa's only chance for recovering its renaissance leadership would be a peace settlement preferably resulting in a transitional DRC government without Kabila. However, with SADC members polarised, it cannot exercise sufficient influence to negotiate with all role-players. President Nelson Mandela has already backflipped on his initial statement that Zimbabwe should not have intervened militarily. Such back-tracking to maintain South African influence over SADC and the renaissance may be too late. Central, Southern and East African leaders have been too badly divided to reconcile themselves to that.

#### *UNITA*

Jonas Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) is opposed to Kabila but they have no formal alliance with the Congo rebels. It is to the greater benefit of the CRD to remove all Angolans from Congo territory.

Strategically, UNITA can best aid the anti-Kabila alliance by intensifying the war at home to pressure a withdrawal of Angolan forces from the DRC. This is occurring, with Savimbi now shipping in 60 tons of weapons a day. There is already heavy fighting between government and UNITA troops in northern provinces bordering the DRC.

Savimbi is unlikely to stay out of the Congo conflict. In mid-August UNITA attacked a Namibian convoy headed for the DRC. Some of his troops have also been spotted fighting alongside the CRD rebels. His attraction is the prospect of linking up with Cabindan separatists, thereby capturing the famous oil fields that finance most activities of Angola's MPLA government (these fields account for 8% of the US oil supply). Should the rebels align themselves with UNITA and engage the MPLA, the Congo war would rapidly spread across several borders creating massive destruction and refugee movements.

#### *Zambia, Botswana and Mozambique*

Supposedly neutral players, these states would fall into the anti-Kabila camp if push came to shove. Worthy of especial mention is the Zambia-UNITA alliance. UNITA has its rear bases in Zambia (see map) and Savimbi is friendly with President Chiluba. An expansion of the war could lead to an Angolan invasion of Zambia. Botswana also has weak relations with Namibia and should the war expand could become militarily engaged in the Caprivi Strip. Mozambique profits from an illicit trade in arms and could play both sides of the fence but would follow South African diplomacy in the short term.

#### *The United States*

The United States worked closely with Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa, Botswana, and Eritrea to remove Mobutu. US Army Special Forces trained the crack Rwanda troops that installed Kabila. The forces remained there until the recent fighting erupted. Rwandan Defence Minister and Vice President Paul Kagame received formal military training at the US Army War College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Uganda, Rwanda, and Eritrea channel American funds to the SPLA rebel movement seeking to overthrow the Islamic fundamentalist regime in Sudan.

Economically, there are major US mining interests in the Congo, some of which have recently been appropriated by Kabila. The US has also advocated, supported and would benefit from a South African-led 'renaissance' that united the Southern African states into an open-border free market economy.

Kabila is an obstruction to all of these interests but there is only a slim chance that the United States would commit troops. Even the threat of such involvement could change the course of the war by challenging geopolitical order in Africa. It would also be viewed as a direct challenge to Islamic fundamentalists. The bombings in Kenya and Tanzania can be seen in the light of such a warning but it also provides a pretext for an increased US presence.

#### *Lesser known allies*

Other anti-Kabila supporters include the Zulu militia of ousted President Lissouba in Congo-Brazzaville; former Mobutu regulars occupying rebel strongholds in the eastern part of the Central African Republic (they resent Kabila and share ties with Lissouba); the Cabindan Enclave Liberation Front (FLEC); and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The SPLA is already engaged in combat alongside the CRD in Eastern Congo.

A wild card is the possible role of Eritrea and Ethiopia. Now at war with each other, they are both US allies with a traditional interest in supporting enemies of Sudan and friends of the Tutsis. However, Sudan is busy exploiting the rift between Eritrea and Ethiopia in consequence of their border war. It aims to win over Ethiopian support by removing its support for Oromo rebels operating inside Sudan. *Africa Confidential* reported in August that Ethiopia remained silent as Sudanese troops pursued the SPLA across the Ethiopian border. In that case Eritrea and Ethiopia could find themselves on opposite sides in a much wider conflagration.

#### **Conclusion**

Altogether, this rich brew of geopolitical alliances spells deep trouble. The worst possible outcome is a major conflagration spread in an arc across Africa from Angola to Sudan and moving quickly toward the Middle East. The best possible outcome is contained low-intensity warfare in Central Africa as the losers in the early rounds return to the bush with their weapons. Genocidal campaigns against the Tutsis seem inevitable.

This war and violence cripples both the African Renaissance and SADC which in turn foretell economic troubles for the entire region. Central, Southern, and East African leaders have been too badly divided to reconcile themselves to a properly organised SADC region or to facilitate an African Renaissance. Devastation in war is reducing the infrastructure for development. In the meantime,

investors are backing away from 'renaissance' notions and returning to the more conservative view of Africa as a 'basket case' of conflict and corruption.

This upset of renaissance discourse and the return of the Old Guard could lead us back towards Westphalian recipes for resolving conflict: enforcing hard-line boundaries and non-interference in the affairs of sovereign states. The hope of side-stepping the effects of the 1884 Berlin Conference through regional integration appears to be failing. Concerns ranging from refugees to troops crossing borders will see a need for increased levels of security along interstate boundaries. While much of the world has turned to collapsing the divides between states, Southern African states will be reinforcing these despite any rhetoric on behalf of the renaissance, free trade, or regional blocs.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> In common parlance, SADC is used as a proper noun, without an article and pronounced like 'sodik'.

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