
Can a Peace Deal Be Made in Doha?

Options for the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the M23

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The Congo Research Group (CRG) was founded in 2015 to promote rigorous, independent research into the violence that affects millions of Congolese. This requires a broad approach. For us, the roots of this violence can be found in a history of predatory governance that dates back to the colonial period and that connects the hillsides of the Kivus with political intrigue and corruption in Kinshasa, as well as in the capitals of Europe, China, and North America. Today, CRG's research aims to explain the complicated interplay among politics, violence, and political economy in the Congo to a wide audience.

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Glossary

AFC	<i>Alliance Fleuve Congo</i> (Congo River Alliance)
AU	African Union
CIAT	<i>Comité International d'Accompagnement de la Transition</i> (International Committee to Accompany the Transition)
CNDP	<i>Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple</i> (National Congress for the Defense of the People)
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization, reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EAC	East African Community
FARDC	<i>Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo</i> (Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo)
FCD	Cabinda Forum for Dialogue
FIB	Force Intervention Brigade
FLEC	<i>Frente para a Libertação do Enclave de Cabinda</i> (Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda)
ICGLR	International Conference on the Great Lakes Region
IFOR	Implementation Force
M23	March 23 Movement
MONUC	<i>Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en République démocratique du Congo</i> (UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo)
MONUSCO	<i>Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo</i> (UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo)
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
ONUMOZ	<i>Operação das Nações Unidas em Moçambique</i> (United Nations Operation in Mozambique)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PNC	<i>Police Nationale Congolaise</i> (Congolese National Police)
RCD	<i>Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie</i> (Congolese Rally for Democracy)
RENAMO	<i>Resistência Nacional Moçambicana</i> (Mozambican National Resistance)
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SFOR	Stabilisation Force
SZOPAD	Special Zone of Peace and Development
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission

1. Introduction

This year, the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been engaged in formal negotiations with the Rwanda-backed March 23 Movement (M23) rebel group that has progressively seized control of large parts of the Congolese provinces of North and South Kivu since late 2021. These negotiations are being hosted by the State of Qatar, in Doha; they are commonly referred to as the Doha process.

The M23 is the most recent in a series of Rwanda-backed rebellions in the eastern DRC. While the Kinshasa government has tried for several years to achieve a military solution to the conflict, it has gradually lost ground to the M23. The Congolese army—along with private security contractors it has hired and local Wazalendo¹ militias it has backed—and troops from the East African Community (EAC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the United Nations, were unsuccessful in stopping the rebels' advance. In early 2025, the M23/*Alliance Fleuve Congo* (AFC, the M23's political umbrella), with backing from the Rwandan army, seized first Goma, then Bukavu—the eastern Congo's two biggest cities. This is the most significant challenge to Congolese sovereignty and stability since the end of the Great Congo Wars in 2003.

This military pressure forced Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi to accept direct negotiations with the M23—something he had previously refused. But these negotiations have focused mostly on preliminary, procedural steps. Thus far, both sides have committed “to uphold their commitment to a permanent ceasefire”² (which has not entirely been implemented) and on a ceasefire monitoring mechanism³, as well as on a mechanism for exchanging prisoners, but not the actual lists of prisoners themselves.⁴ At the time of publication, they had yet to discuss the major substantive points of contention: power-sharing, demobilization, amnesty, refugee return, as well as other issues.

It is important for the peace process in the DRC to consider lessons learned from both other countries and the country's own past. We examine the three previous attempts to deal with Rwandan-backed rebellions: the RCD in 2002, the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP) in 2009, and the first M23 one in

2013. The parties at the negotiation table themselves are already shaped by these past peace processes and negotiations.

This paper focuses on the immediate options for an agreement between the M23 and the Congolese government. We outline five possible outcomes of the Doha mediation process between the DRC government and the AFC/M23. We do not endorse any of the five possible outcomes—instead, we present the advantages and disadvantages of each. These options range from the scenario most favorable to the DRC to the one most favorable to the M23.

Out of necessity, this agreement will probably not be able to tackle many of the long-term drivers of conflict: the need for strong, accountable institutions (especially in the security sector), social and economic exclusion, communal reconciliation, and land tenure reforms. Those goals will need to be integrated into a wider peace process that can address the many other armed groups in the DRC.

Success in Doha will also depend on the implementation of a separate peace agreement between Rwanda and the DRC, which was signed on June 27, 2025 in Washington, DC under the auspices of the United States (US).⁵ While the specifics of this parallel peace agreement are not discussed here, we argue that ending the M23 rebellion will rely on external pressure on Kigali and Kinshasa. Conversely, the success of the Washington agreement increasingly appears to rely on progress made in Doha. Finally, Washington and Doha will also need to involve other actor—other foreign donors, but in particular African organizations and actors—if either process is to succeed.

2. Broad Contours for a Peace Agreement

Every peace process has a different constellation of actors, mediators, and issues that need to be addressed. This chapter distills some commonalities of successful agreements, drawing on a review of the literature on peace processes.⁶ Broadly speaking, a peace agreement needs to:

- Guarantee enforcement: Agree to credible third-party guarantors.
- Layer the bargain: Combine political, military, and economic provisions rather than relying on one dimension.
- Build joint security: Integrate commands; create vetted, unified units; and sequence disarmament, demobilization, reintegration (DDR) with verifiable milestones.
- Institutionalize inclusion: Involve civil society in negotiations and seat civil society in monitoring and implementation bodies, not just at the peace agreement signing.
- Address justice credibly: Avoid blanket amnesties; pair reintegration with victim-centered accountability.

In the negotiations between the M23/AFC and DRC government, the process toward an ultimate peace agreement will have to focus on the following issues:

The fate of both the M23 and AFC leadership

- Integration or demobilization of civilian and military leadership
- Amnesty and accountability mechanisms

Policy issues

- Refugee return
- DDR
- Communal reconciliation
- Economic development
- Territorial administration

External guarantees

- Guarantors of the agreement

- Political and economic pressure on both sides
- Oversight mechanisms

2.1 Literature on Peace Agreements

Scholarship on peace agreements suggests that a successful peace process requires both the appropriate design, as well as significant political involvement. Here are the main factors highlighted by the scholarly literature on the ingredients for success.

2.1.1 Credible security guarantees—the commitment problem

A core obstacle in civil wars is that disarming incentivizes each side, especially the government in this case, to abandon the peace agreement.⁷ Durable settlements almost always add external enforcement—security guarantees, guarantor states, or peacekeepers—and incentives, such as aid and investments from mediator and likeminded countries, to make promises credible.

Examples:

- The Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland included long-term United Kingdom (UK/Irish/US) guarantees.⁸
- The UN Operation in Mozambique (ONUMOZ) verified demobilization and cantonment, monitored elections, and—along with donor engagement and the Rome Peace Accords—built trust that the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) rebels would not be crushed once they disarmed.⁹
- In the former Yugoslavia, the Implementation Force (previously named IFOR, then SFOR) under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) provided robust external enforcement—without NATO’s credible use of force, there was a significant risk that the Bosnian state and its institutions would have collapsed.¹⁰

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The 2002 Global and Inclusive Agreement enshrined a donor coordination body (CIAT) as guarantor of the peace agreement and in practice the UN peacekeeping mission helped oversee implementation. This worked well in guiding the transition through to elections in 2006 but was not able to tackle the defection of the RCD and the creation of the CNDP in 2004.

While there was an oversight committee to the 2009 peace agreement with the CNDP,¹¹ it had little impact, and the peace agreement between Rwanda and the DRC was never made public. The first M23 rebellion in 2012–2013 ended in the December 2013 Declarations¹² signed by the M23 and the DRC government. This was not a peace agreement per se, and the UN, African Union (AU), International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), and SADC acted as witnesses but not as formal guarantors. There was limited meaningful implementation of the pledges made.

2.1.2 Multidimensional power-sharing, not just cabinet posts

Power-sharing that spans political, military, and economic dimensions reduces the risk of relapse—especially when multiple dimensions are combined.

- Economic: For example, Angola's Cabinda province (2006)¹³ and Bangladesh's Chittagong Hills (1997)¹⁴ were granted local management of funding and tax revenues. In the Philippines, the 1996 peace agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) provided for a Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD) covering 14 provinces and nine cities; these areas then became the focus of development programs.¹⁵
- Military: In El Salvador, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) were integrated into the national police and the role of the army in domestic matters was limited.¹⁶ Similarly, in Burundi, the 2000 Arusha agreement created a quota system of power sharing between Hutu and Tutsi in the army.¹⁷
- Political: In the Philippines, the 1996 peace agreement created a Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) to oversee the transition before a plebiscite on autonomy, the autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was expanded and MNLF leaders were integrated into its leadership.¹⁸ In Cabinda, the 2006 agreement created a special status for Cabinda within Angola, as well as a Cabinda Forum for Dialogue (FCD) to serve as a political consultative body. Former Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC) leaders and Cabindan representatives received positions in provincial and national government and the FLEC leader António Bento Bembe became minister without portfolio in the Angolan government.¹⁹

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The 2009 agreement was exclusively military—integrating the CNDP into the FARDC and giving them extensive power in the Kivus. The 2013 Declaration was broader, including commitments to refugee return, demobilization, and amnesty, but was never implemented. The 2002 peace agreement was a broad, comprehensive accord, including transitional justice, decentralization, and power sharing. However, implementation was largely limited to power-sharing in the government and military.

2.1.3 Inclusion beyond armed elites

Agreements that bring civil society (women's groups, churches, unions, business, etc.) into negotiating/implementation bodies enjoy significantly greater durability. Inclusion bolsters legitimacy and helps monitor spoilers at the grassroots.

Examples:

- Liberia (2003): This agreement brought political parties, civil society, women's organizations (notably WIPNET – Women in Peacebuilding Network), and religious leaders together, not just the two main armed factions (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy and Movement for Democracy in Liberia) along with Charles Taylor's government. It created seats for civil society representatives in government and explicit roles for women and political parties.²⁰ This helped legitimize the transition and gave Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's later presidency strong civic backing.
- Nepal (2006): The peace process involved a massive popular movement ("People's Movement II") that included civil society, student unions, human rights organizations, and political parties.²¹ Many of the provisions of the peace agreement were influenced by these actors, including the abolition of the monarchy, the creation of a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution, human rights protections, and political reform. Their involvement ensured broader legitimacy.

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In 2008, the Goma peace forum involved hundreds of representatives from civil society, armed groups, customary elites, political parties, and government. However, it did not result in a binding peace agreement. The 2013 Addis Ababa Framework Agreement²² had only limited involvement of civil society, which was also not given much of a role to play in the follow-up mechanisms. The 2009 and 2013 peace agreements with the CNDP and M23 did not involve civil society.

2.1.4 Justice vs. amnesty trade-offs

Blanket amnesties may buy short-term calm but can undercut legitimacy and invite future violence. Conversely, demanding accountability for all crimes immediately can prevent the conclusion and implementation of the peace agreement. Victims' rights provisions are increasingly seen as part of a durable peace package.

Examples:

- Liberia (2003): There was a general amnesty for war crimes committed by fighters and political leaders during the civil war.²³ Exceptions were made for cases pursued by international tribunals for serious violations, though enforcement was limited.
- Colombia (2016): There was an amnesty for political crimes committed by Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC) rebels, but it excluded serious crimes such as massacres, genocide, and sexual violence.²⁴ This encouraged the FARC to disarm and enter politics while creating space for victims' rights and accountability.
- Argentina, Guatemala, and Chile: Members of the former dictatorships were successfully prosecuted, but in all these countries it took decades for this to take place.²⁵

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The 2009 and 2013 peace processes with the CNDP and M23 did not involve civil society. There have been few successful prosecutions for crimes committed by either the FARDC or M23 following peace agreements. Some M23 officers have been excluded from military integration, and many have faced arrest warrants and international sanctions.²⁶

2.2 Learning from Past Peace Processes

Tensions between Rwanda and the DRC have formed the main fault line in the Congolese conflict since 1996. This is the fifth time there has been credible proof that Rwanda has backed an armed group in the DRC.²⁷ Each time, the rebellions have ended in negotiated settlements. Studying these agreements and understanding their strengths and weaknesses can help improve current prospects for a peace accord in Doha.

2.2.1 The Sun City Agreement (2002)²⁸

The largest, most comprehensive peace process stretched from 1999 to 2006 in an effort to bring an end to the Great Congo Wars that drew in nine African countries and divided the country.²⁹ Led by the United Nations, the African Union, and with significant pressure by the United States, South Africa, and European countries, it culminated in the Global and Inclusive Agreement in December 2002, often called the Sun City Agreement. The agreement was prompted by a military stalemate, significant pressure on the Rwandan, Ugandan, and Congolese governments by donors, and sustained diplomacy.

The agreement unified the country, forging a transitional government that shared power between former belligerents, as well as civil society and the political opposition, in all national and provincial institutions, including the police and army. It also led to a new constitution that ushered in multi-party democracy. There were no meaningful prosecutions of war crimes and only a very short-lived truth and reconciliation commission. There was also little progress on creating strong, accountable institutions within the Congolese state.

Like many peace processes, this one culminated in elections, which marked an end to the transition in 2006. It was this aspect of the process that led to renewed fighting—the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) rebellion that had been backed by Rwanda was unpopular and stood to lose much of its power at the polls. This led to the defection of some of its senior commanders, led by General Laurent Nkunda and including much of the current M23 leadership, to create the National Congress for the Defense of the People.

→ *Lessons: Political pressure and strong diplomacy, coupled with a hurting military stalemate, forced Rwanda and Uganda to end their occupation of over half of the DRC. The United Nations played a critical role in overseeing the peace process through the 2006 elections. However, the lesson Rwanda and the current M23 leaders likely drew from this is that it is extremely difficult for them to gain political power through the ballot box. This suggests that current proposals to allow the M23 to become a political party will not be attractive to them.*

2.2.2 The March 23 Agreement (2009)³⁰

The CNDP fought the Congolese government until late 2008, when an informal agreement was reached between Kinshasa and Kigali.³¹ Subsequently, the Rwandan government arrested Laurent Nkunda and forced the CNDP to integrate into the Congolese army with a formal peace agreement signed on March 23, 2009. They were provided with senior positions in the army command of North and South Kivu, giving them significant control in both provinces. At the same time, Rwanda was allowed to deploy several thousand troops to the eastern DRC to pursue the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) in Operation Umoja Wetu (Our Unity). When, after five weeks, the Rwandan Defence Forces withdrew, the FARDC continued operations against the FDLR, led by ex-CNDP officers. There was no political power-sharing with the CNDP, although they were allowed to become a political party (they never won any positions in elections).

The rebels were given a partial amnesty for crimes of insurrection; none of the underlying issues of refugee return, communal reconciliation, or accountability for past crimes were ever addressed. There was no international oversight of the peace process.

The agreement unraveled in 2012. In the wake of a controversial presidential election, Kabila came under pressure from domestic and international partners to dismantle the ex-CNDP networks that dominated the military command in the Kivus. He moved to arrest Bosco Ntaganda, who had been indicted by the

International Criminal Court, and to disperse ex-CNDP officers across the country.³² This led to a new rebellion, named the March 23 Movement, or M23, after the previous peace agreement.

→ *Lessons: Several aspects of this process allowed it to unravel: the unpopularity of sharing military power with the CNDP in the Kivus; the lack of effective third-party oversight of the peace process; the absence of civil society in the negotiations; and the CNDP's ability to maintain strong parallel chains of command despite their integration into the Congolese army.*

2.2.3 The Kampala Agreement (2013)³³

The M23 initially formed in 2012, led by many of the same military and political officers who are in the movement today. When it seized Goma in November 2012, it prompted a large international response.³⁴ The Southern African Development Community (SADC) deployed several thousand well-equipped South African, Tanzanian, and Malawian troops to fight the M23 as part of the United Nations' Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), while donors suspended USD 240 million in aid to Rwanda.³⁵ The U.S. government was particularly forceful in its condemnation of Rwandan interference. In mid-2013, the Rwandan government pulled its military backing of the M23, which had already splintered into two main groups; it was defeated by the FARDC and its partners in late 2013.

Before the M23's defeat, diplomats had forged a broad peace process, led by the African Union and the United Nations. It culminated in the Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework Agreement (PSCF), often called the Addis Ababa Framework Agreement, in February 2013. As the name suggests, it provided a framework for the peace process, calling for the DRC to reform its governance and security sector, allow for refugee return, promote communal reconciliation, and not allow foreign armed groups to operate on its territory. Regional countries agreed to respect Congolese sovereignty. Eleven countries, including the DRC and Rwanda, signed the agreement.

Despite the M23's defeat, diplomats insisted that the peace talks between the DRC government and the rebels be finalized. In December 2013, the two parties issued separate declarations; there was no formal peace agreement. The government gave the M23 amnesty for crimes of insurrection and committed to allow refugees to return and M23 combatants to be integrated into the police and army on a case-by-case basis. A joint commission, with ICGLR and SADC participation, was supposed to oversee this process but there was little effective follow-up.

→ *Lessons: The international community acted swiftly and decisively by pressuring Rwanda and attempting to find an overarching agreement. This led Rwanda to pull the plug on the rebellion. However, once it was defeated, the Congolese government had little motivation to implement its commitments, while the various regional bodies did little to follow up. The peace process fizzled out, and a large share of the senior M23 commanders, as well as hundreds of troops, remained in Uganda and Rwanda.*

2.3 Options for the Doha process

These past experiences should inform the options on the table at Doha.

Typically, peace processes do not succeed unless belligerents believe they stand to benefit or they are being forced to comply by outside parties. In the current Congolese conflict, both sides will have to make significant compromises to allow the peace process to be successful—i.e., for it to produce outcomes that are satisfactory to both parties, do not lead to a resumption of hostilities, and address overarching grievances of both parties. If the agreement does not reflect the relative interests and power of all sides, then fighting could resume once international pressure and oversight subsides, or even before that.

For the Congolese government, it is politically expedient to be able to blame Rwanda for the war; it could also be politically very costly to make concessions to a rebellion that is seen as illegitimate by most Congolese. Likewise, for the M23 and Rwanda, all past peace processes have ended up marginalizing them. Given their unpopularity—at the provincial and national level—it would likely be difficult for the M23 or the AFC to win many elected seats at any level of government.

The temptation is therefore large for both sides to keep the status quo, to pay lip service to peace talks, but to avoid any genuine commitments to peace. The design of the process thus depends largely on the political pressure and economic incentives applied by external actors. Absent this there is likely to be a renewed escalation of violence. The sequencing of measures as part of an eventual peace agreement will also be crucial to its success, although this paper does not have space to address this question in detail here.

The following options reflect a range of possible outcomes of the Doha process. They include both immediate measures that can be taken following a peace agreement between the DRC and M23, as well as longer-term measures that will need to be part of a broader peace process. The options range from those least

favorable to the M23 and involving extensive international pressure on Rwanda to those most favorable to the M23. These are just examples and the details could vary.

Option 1: Rwanda withdraws, M23 collapses, no peace process

Political and economic power-sharing

- None, other than the promise to allow the M23 to become a political party and contest elections.

Military power-sharing

- Minimal case-by-case integration of M23 combatants into FARDC.
- Minimal case-by-case integration of M23 into FARDC command structure, at the discretion of the Congolese government.

Policy issues

- No commitment to federalism, further decentralization, or redistricting.
- Commitment to continue the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-facilitated process on refugee return.
- Commitment to continue current P-DDRCS process.
- Amnesty for crimes of insurrection, none for other crimes.
- No commitment to further communal reconciliation.

External guarantees and follow-up

- A follow-up committee or organization is formed out of Qatar, the US, and the AU.

This option resembles the 2013 resolution of the M23 conflict. In this scenario, the rebels would withdraw from the territory they occupy in return for partial amnesty for crimes of insurrection, a policy process to address refugee return, and promises to provide demobilization for M23 troops alongside the demobilization of other armed groups.

This option would provide few guarantees for the M23 to retain military and political power. It does not address many of the underlying causes of the conflicts in the eastern DRC—refugee return, impunity, regional meddling, or poor governance. This is more or less what the Congolese government promised in the 2013 Addis Ababa Framework Agreement; very little progress was made.

For the Congolese government, this option is the most attractive and there have been reports that this would be its preferred option, including a cantonment of M23 fighters.

Advantages: Many critics of the M23, as well as large sectors of the Congolese population, do not think that the rebellion is legitimate, even if some of their demands or grievances may be (refugee return, provisions against hate speech, poor governance). This agreement would not reward rebellion with any positions or other hand-outs.

Disadvantages: The M23 would reject this proposal—it would probably bring about its political end, since it would be unlikely to win any seats in a democratic election and the agreement may also expose M23 leaders to retaliation from the DRC government. Since the Congolese government does not have the military upper hand, this agreement would require overwhelming pressure on the Rwandan government to work, which seems unlikely at the moment.

Option 2: Rwanda withdraws, M23 weakened, credible peace process

Political and economic power-sharing

- Commitment to allow the M23 to become a political party and vie in elections.
- Creation of a special stabilization authority in the Kivus and Ituri for reconstruction and stabilization to oversee DDR, communal reconciliation (for example through a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, TRC), refugee return, and reconstruction.
- Potential positions for M23, as well as civil society and political parties in this special stabilization authority.

Military power-sharing

- Case-by-case integration of M23 combatants into FARDC.
- Case-by case integration of M23 officers into FARDC command structure, at the discretion of the Congolese government.

Policy issues

- No commitment to federalism or further decentralization.
- General amnesty for M23 combatants, vetting of their officers, no amnesty for war crimes.

External guarantees

- External guarantors: US, Qatar, AU.
- Follow-up: MONUSCO with AU involvement.

This option would also be disadvantageous to the M23 but would try to tackle some of the underlying drivers of the conflict that the rebels as well the Congolese government have agreed on in the past: communal reconciliation, refugee return through the UNHCR tripartite mechanism, and economic reconstruction. It would do so through the creation of a semi-independent structure to oversee development, demobilization, and reconciliation programs in the conflict area, similar to structures created as part of the peace agreements in the Philippines in 1996 and in Colombia in 2016. The M23 could be represented in this structure, providing employment for some of its leaders and a say in those programs. In Colombia and the Philippines, there were also guaranteed political positions for the former rebels, with safeguards to ensure that they did not become a parallel state.

Advantages: It would address legitimate grievances of the local population, including those of the Tutsi community, without rewarding the M23 for having taken arms. Many outside observers agree that these grievances are some of the root causes of the conflicts that have persisted since 1993. It would also provide a genuine commitment to implement the agreement, as external mediators would be involved in its implementation, and civil society actors would take part, as well.

Disadvantages: The M23 would be effectively dismantled, as it would almost not win much, if any, representation at elections and the seats reserved for it may not be incentive enough for it to participate in this agreement. The challenge would therefore be to get the M23 to sign on, requiring significant external pressure on the M23 and Rwanda. There would also be the challenge of getting the DRC government to follow through on its promises.

In order to get this arrangement to work, it would also require significant foreign funding for economic development, providing a peace dividend for the eastern DRC, and luring combatants away from the battlefield into DDR programs, infrastructure-building, and other programs. This would be challenging, given the current decline in foreign aid.

Option 3: M23 integrated, genuine peace process

Political and economic power-sharing

- M23 receives senior positions in territorial and provincial administration based on explicit agreement on sharing of power.
- Creation of a special economic zone in the Kivus and Ituri for reconstruction and stabilization to oversee DDR, communal reconciliation (for example through a TRC), refugee return, and reconstruction.
- Potential positions for M23 in this structure.

Military power-sharing

- Partial integration of M23 combatants into FARDC, demobilization of the rest.
- M23 receives senior positions in FARDC at provincial level based on explicit agreement on sharing of power.

Policy issues

- No commitment to federalism, further decentralization, or redistricting.
- General amnesty for M23 combatants, vetting of M23 and FARDC officers to retire those alleged to have committed serious crimes in past 20 years.

External guarantees

- External guarantors: US, Qatar, AU.
- Follow-up: MONUSCO with AU involvement.

This option is similar to the previous one, but provides significantly more concessions for the M23, including positions in local administration and in provincial military hierarchy.

Advantages: Giving the M23 positions would give them an incentive to participate in the process.

Disadvantages: Giving positions to M23 falls into the much-lamented trap of rewarding rebels for having taken arms and would be difficult to defend in front of the broader Congolese population. This option is likely to provoke significant backlash among the Congolese political elites in Kinshasa, in particular parts of the opposition, as well as among Congolese civil society—all of whom will likely argue that this is a humiliation for the DRC that perpetuates impunity feeding further violence.

Similarly to the previous option, it would require significant donor funding, which seems difficult to obtain in the current context of sharp decreases to foreign assistance budgets.

Option 4: M23 receives temporary degree of autonomy (Qatari proposal of August 2025)³⁶

Political and economic power-sharing

- Congolese government appoints M23 officials in local government after consultation with them.
- Special elections held in 2027 in occupied areas.
- Creation of an Economic Relief Plan in the Kivus for reconstruction and stabilization to oversee DDR, communal reconciliation, refugee return, and reconstruction.

Military power-sharing

- Special Interim Force to have exclusive control of M23 areas for 5 years, composed of 50 percent to the M23 and 50 percent to the Congolese National Police (PNC) and new local recruits.
- Command positions of Special Interim Force designated by government of DRC with consent of M23.

Policy issues

- National Dialogue in 2026.
- No commitment to federalism or further decentralization.
- Creation of a TRC that will also be in charge of accountability for serious crimes.

External guarantees

- External guarantors: Qatar, AU.
- Follow-up: Creation of Multilateral Monitoring Mechanism with MONUSCO and potentially EAC, SADC, and ICGLR.

This is more or less the proposal put forward by Qatar on August 14, 2025. It gives the M23 significant military power in the occupied Kivus for five years, as they would be given 50 percent of the special force that has exclusive control of the area (although it is not clear which command positions they would occupy).

There are some other vague parts of the proposal—it is not clear what the mandate of the national dialogue would be, how the TRC would interact with the Congolese judiciary, and how many and at what levels M23 officials would be integrated into

local government. Like many of these options, it would also require approval by Congolese parliament.

Advantages: The clear advantage of this proposal is that the M23 would be likely to participate in the process, even though they have protested the clause which states that it must return territory to the Congolese government.

Disadvantages: It is difficult to imagine the Congolese government, or the broader political elite in the country, bending to these terms. Much of the proposal is also relatively vague and would require operationalization.

Option 5: M23 receives extensive autonomy

Political and economic power-sharing

- Three-year country-wide transition ahead of next elections.
- During the transition, power-sharing across national institutions among M23, government, civil society, and opposition parties.
- For eight years, eastern DRC declared disaster zone with a special status that guarantees it a degree of financial, military, and administrative autonomy.

Military power-sharing

- Dissolve the FARDC and create a new army to render it more professional and accountable.

Policy issues

- Creation of a commission in charge of refugee return.
- A commitment to consider a reform to the constitution to make the DRC into a federal country with significant devolution of power to the provinces.
- Creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to promote communal reconciliation.

External guarantees

- External guarantors: EAC, Qatar, AU.

This proposal draws on suggestions put forward by M23 negotiators in Doha, according to sources close to the process.

Advantages: This proposal could bring an end to the M23's military attacks and expansion by acceding to many of its demands.

Disadvantages: This proposal, which sources close to the talks say is close to what the M23 is asking for, would require so many concessions from the Tshisekedi government that it would be impossible for it to accept without facing a crisis of domestic legitimacy. It would require a national power-sharing agreement, much like in 2003–2006, dissolve the national army, and reform the constitution to make the DRC a federal state with much greater devolution of power to the provincial level.

3. Conclusion

Any peace process will have to find the narrow window of the possible, defined by the political interests of both parties, the skill of the negotiators, and the pressure brought to bear by external actors. Even if this window can be found, the resulting agreement can be short-lived if the terms set out are unrealistic, or if the outside pressure fizzles. This has often been seen in the DRC, which is why we are confronted with yet another M23 rebellion—previous peace agreements have not been successful.

As this paper has argued, many of the actors involved—Rwanda, the M23, and the DRC—have incentives for the conflict to continue in some form or another. For many, peace is costly, as it requires difficult reforms, a switch from a conflict economy to a peacetime one and produces a shift in power from armed actors to civilians. For some in the DRC and Rwandan governments, as well as in the M23, the goal may simply be to drag their feet and wait until talks collapse.

The options laid out provide an idea of what a solution *could* look like between the M23 and the DRC government. Given the relative military strength of the RDF/M23, as well as the extent of donor pressure, the options that would have the greatest chance of being accepted by both the M23 and the Congolese government would probably be #2 and #3, although for both, considerable pressure and compromise would be required. Those two options include incentives for the M23 to end their rebellion, but also maintain provisions for justice and accountability, and address some of the root causes of the conflict. However, success will require significant political will—from foreign donors (the US, the European Union, and others) and, above all, the Rwandan and Congolese governments to first to sign an agreement and, in the months and possibly years following the signature, to implement and adhere to its terms. As important as the design of the agreement therefore is, it is these political aspects that will probably be most critical.

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