

# The Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity: Path or Barrier to Sustainable Peace in the DRC-Rwanda Conflict

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**Abstract-** *The Washington Accords, initially signed on June 27, 2025, between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda, mark a significant United States-brokered effort to address one of Africa's most protracted and deadliest conflicts in the Great Lakes region. The subsequent December 2025 incorporation of the Regional Economic Integration Framework (REIF) expanded the accords' economic scope but did not resolve the structural flaws, as evidenced by continued M23 offensives and implementation failures. This article examines the Washington Accords to assess its prospect for delivering peace in the conflict-affected areas. The elite pact theory and a qualitative analytical approach are employed, drawing on official documents, expert commentary, reports to provide theoretical and interpretive depth, particularly in relation to the strategic security and mineral interests of the externally brokered parties. The accord provided for troop withdrawal, joint security coordination, refugee repatriation, and economic integration, but its structure excludes major non-state armed actors, contains limited enforcement and verification mechanisms, and prioritizes external economic interests over local accountability and inclusion. The article establishes that if these shortcomings are not addressed, the accord risks long-term failure and may follow the same pattern as previous peace agreements in the region. It therefore recommends dialogue with armed groups and the local communities, robust and independent monitoring mechanisms, and governance reform that addresses the underlying political and economic drivers of the conflict as necessary conditions for transforming the Accord into a framework for sustained peace.*

**Keywords:** *Washington Accords, DRC-Rwanda conflict, Elite Pact, M23, peace agreement, Great Lakes, conflict resolution, REIF.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the post-Cold War era, the conflict between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda is regarded as one of the deadliest conflicts in the world,

particularly considering that over six million people have died since the late 1990s and more than seven million people are currently displaced across the Great Lakes region (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). This conflict stems from the 1994 Rwandan genocide and has been further fueled by competition over DRC's mineral wealth, remaining unresolved despite several decades of international mediation efforts (Al-Khulaifi, 2025).

The United States achieved a diplomatic breakthrough on June 27, 2025, through a landmark agreement between Kinshasa and Kigali known as the Washington Accords, represented by foreign ministers, with President Donald Trump playing a direct role in the negotiations (Plaut, 2025). The December accords, directly signed by the Presidents of DRC and Rwanda and hosted by Trump, reaffirmed the June signing and formally signed the REIF as the economic component of the Washington Accords. The resolution provides for troops withdrawal, joint security coordination, and economic integration, raising a fundamental question: under what conditions can externally brokered peace accords succeed in the Great Lakes region? Within the wider political and economic context of the Great Lakes region, this article critically examines this issue.

This article contributes to the literature on conflict resolution in the Great Lakes region examining the Washington Accords as a case of externally brokered, mineral-driven peace diplomacy, highlighting how enforcement deficits and exclusion of non-state armed actors undermine sustainability. Therefore, this research serves as a theory-informed critique of the elite peace accords where locals are overlooked and the prospects of sustained enforcement beyond the Trump administration seem limited.

## II. ELITE PACT THEORY

The major proponents of this theory are Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986) who, defined it as 'an explicit agreement between a select set of actors which seeks to define or redefine rules governing the exercise of power on the basis of mutual guarantees for the vital interests of those involved.' The Washington Accords embodies the elite pact rather than the elite bargaining because it sets new rules to govern the relationship between DRC and Rwanda; however, when the two states continue to bargain post-agreement benefits, the process reverts to elite bargaining.

Elite pact theory argues that in order to stabilize governance after conflict, powerful political, economic and military elites within a society form agreements governing the affected region. When such agreement fails, they often lead to renewed and more violent crises, non-implementation of provisions, increased risk of military coups, and erosion of trust. For this agreement to be sustainable and for inclusive peace to be achieved, there must be broad participation, attention to underlying issues, multi-level coalition, and long-term support.

The Washington Accords fits elite pact theory by guaranteeing the phased withdrawal of Rwandan forces and mandating DRC neutralize the FDLR (a Hutu-led militia seen as an existential threat by Rwanda), thereby assuring both parties that their core security interests are not compromised without reciprocal guarantees. It also fits the elite pact model because the agreement was negotiated by top-tier mediators rather than grassroots actors, including the M23 and other local militias. The side deals that economically benefits external mediators are characteristics of elite pact: the DRC is expected to receive investment, while the United States gains access to the rare-earth minerals.

The Accord violates the elite pact principles by neglecting the role and influence of the M23 and other rebel groups. Elite pact theory further establishes that, for a pact to endure, it must incorporate the voices of those that possess the capacity to sabotage it.

This article is a qualitative policy analysis that adopts secondary sources including official documents, expert commentary, institutional reports, to conduct a critical discourse analysis of the Washington Accords. The qualitative approach was necessary to interpret political intentions, elite decision-making, and power dynamics embedded in the Washington Accords, rather than to measure variables or test statistical relationships. By using a qualitative approach, the research critically assesses how elite pact dynamics, exclusion of key actors, and enforcement mechanisms influence the prospects for sustainable peace which are insights that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative data alone. The sources were selected carefully based on the relevance, credibility and direct connection to the Washington Accords and the DRC-Rwandan conflict.

## III. HISTORICAL & GEOPOLITICAL BACKGROUND

The Rwanda-DRC conflict took root following the seismic political and humanitarian conditions that emerged after the 1994 Rwandan genocide, during which an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed within 100 days (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). In the aftermath of the genocide, a massive refugee crisis was triggered, involving over two million people, including elements of the former Rwandan army and Interahamwe militia, who fled into the eastern Zaire, now the DRC (Human Rights Watch, 2002; United Nations Security Council, 1996). These armed factions established bases in the Kivu provinces, using refugee camps as cover to launch cross-border attacks into Rwanda (Nyaga, 2017).

These complex conditions prompted Rwanda, alongside Uganda, to respond by backing a series of rebellions in eastern DRC, most notably during the First Congo War (1996–1997) and Second Congo War (1998–2003), often referred to as 'Africa's World War' due to the involvement of nine African states (Amnesty International, 2024). In the past few years, the United Nations and human rights organizations have accused Rwanda of providing materials and logistics to the M23 rebel movement, a group that re-emerged in 2021 after a period of dormancy (United Nations News, 2025).

The vast natural resources found in eastern DRC including cobalt, gold, and lithium, have attracted external powers seeking strategic access, while also serving as a source of financing to the armed groups, and have become a chief driver of the conflict (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). The instability that has engulfed the Great Lakes region is driven by a combination of local grievances, cross-border insurgencies, and global resource politics, creating a cycle of violence resistant to conventional peacekeeping and bilateral agreements.

#### IV. THE WASHINGTON ACCORDS: TERMS AND PROCESS

Signed on June 27, 2025, the Washington Accords represents the most high-profile U.S. intervention in the Rwanda–DRC conflict in over two decades (United States Department of States, 2025). A series of phased commitments aimed at reducing cross-border hostilities was reached through the direct involvement of the U.S President Donald Trump. The central provisions include:

- a. The withdrawal of Rwandan troops in phases within 90 days from North Kivu and Ituri provinces, monitored by a joint African Union–United Nations verification team.
- b. A compulsory discontinuation of all forms of support, financially or otherwise, for armed rebel groups, notably the M23 rebellion, by all state actors.
- c. The creation of a Joint Security Coordination Mechanism, which will enable Rwanda and DRC to share intelligence, coordinate border patrols, and conduct joint anti-smuggling operations.
- d. A framework for voluntary refugee return, guaranteeing safety, land rights, and reintegration assistance for nationals of Rwanda and Congo who were displaced by the conflict.
- e. An economic integration plan for formalizing mineral supply chains, curbing illicit trade, and facilitating responsible United States private-sector investment to secure global critical mineral supplies.

The degree of personalization in the negotiation made this resolution distinct within the arena of diplomacy. President Trump’s direct engagement in multiple calls with Presidents Félix Tshisekedi and Paul Kagame

during the phases of negotiations which bypassed the conventional diplomatic channels, strengthened the prospects of accord’s implementation. The mediators involved in the agreement included United States Secretary of States Marco Rubio, known for his hawkish stance on China’s influence in Africa, and Lebanese-American businessman Massad Boulos, who emphasized the commercial dimension of the accord (Al Jazeera, 2025).

From the United States’ perspective, the Accord enabled it ease one of Africa’s longest-running conflicts, thereby enhancing its influence in the international arena as a core diplomatic actor. It also helped secure a strategic foothold in the critical minerals market, an area Chinese companies are currently ahead. It served a vital dual purpose.

#### V. REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS

The Washington Accords received mixed reactions from stakeholders at the regional level. The President of the DRC, Félix Tshisekedi, speaking in Kinshasa, praised the Accord for establishing a ‘new chapter’ in the country’s relationship with Kigali after decades of conflict. The opposition in Kinshasa warned that the Accord legitimized the prior presence of the Rwandan military in eastern DRC (Anadolu Agency, 2025). In its official statement, Kigali welcomed the initiatives of the Accord and avoided acknowledging any prior support for the M23, instead framing the accord as a ‘joint security initiative’. It further stated that if the agreement fails, responsibility would lie not with Rwanda but with the DRC, and warned that if Kinshasa does not uphold its commitments, Rwanda would continue to address the conflict through its established security approach (Al Jazeera, 2025).

The African Union (AU) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) offered cautious endorsements; they praised the ability of United States to facilitate the agreement but emphasized the need for an African-led oversight mechanisms (African Union, 2025).

At the international level, the European Union welcomed the agreement and called for a transparent enforcement of its provisions in order to avoid

exacerbating local grievances (European External Action Service, 2025).

China responded to the Washington Accords through an address to the UN Security Council, expressing cautious support for the de-escalation of the DRC-Rwanda conflict, emphasizing ‘sincere dialogue’ and the immediate cessation of hostilities are the only viable paths to peace (Fu, 2025). It urged the international community to ‘set aside geopolitical calculations’ and prioritize regional stability over external strategic interests. China reaffirms its commitment to the DRC’s territorial integrity while calling on the M23 rebels to halt further offensive operations and urging external forces to cease support for armed groups.

## VI. CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS

While this agreement has been celebrated in some quarters as a breakthrough, it contains structural weaknesses that have caused previous initiatives to fail in the Great Lakes region (Cascais, 2025). One of those weaknesses is the exclusion of M23 rebels as an important signatory in the Washington Accords. Without the participation of key armed actors, the accord risks being undermined by spoilers who see no incentive to comply. This elite pact has revealed its weaknesses through narrow participation and its inability to address the root causes of the conflict. Even if Kigali abides by the agreement not to sponsor the rebels, the armed groups control lucrative mineral resources that can be liquidated to finance their operations. An agreement that does not involve the armed non-state actors, who are a major source of instability, is bound to fail.

The agreement’s monitoring and enforcement mechanisms also appear fragile. Weak verification processes and absence of meaningful sanctions against defaulting actors could cause the Washington Accords to falter, as occurred with the 2013 Nairobi Declaration (African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, 2013). Although the AU-UN verification team is planned under the Washington Accords, the political will to enforce violation, particularly against Kigali, remains uncertain. Why should a resolution to a decades-old African conflict be decided through Washington-centered negotiation with an enforcement mechanism reliant on good faith

of the state actors, without corresponding on-the-ground monitoring agency in eastern DRC? When there is a well-defined enforcement mechanism, greater compliance from all parties can be achieved. This agreement can therefore be seen as a ‘gentleman’s agreement,’ particularly since one of its mechanism for verification is the African Union, which is often characterized as weak, ineffective, and financially constrained (Okoli & Igboke, 2025).

Critics also argue that the accord reflects Washington’s strategic mineral interests more than a commitment to justice or reconciliation, particularly given the exclusion of the primary armed force, M23, from the negotiations. The stipulation in the agreement granting the United States preferential access to DRC’s cobalt and lithium reserves has raised concerns that economic priorities are being placed above accountability for war crimes and systemic human rights abuses (The Guardian, 2025). The Washington Agreement established an elaborate process through which the United States’ parastatal entities could access to DRC’s mineral resources, yet failed to involve the armed actors driving the conflict, provided limited enforcement mechanisms, and ruled out American military presence on the ground. As China emphasized, the agreement must prioritize regional stability over external strategic interests. The conflict has yet to be adequately settled, but America’s strategic interests have been established and cemented for decades to come.

Conflict resolution theory further warns of the “elite pact trap”, wherein deals negotiated between state leaders without grassroots participation fail to address local grievances over governance, land, and ethnic tensions, as noted by historian Lugete Mussa Lugete, who argues that such ‘elite-driven’ agreements ignored entrenched local realities and exclude grassroots voices, thereby risking continued instability (Agwanda, & Nyadera, 2025; The Guardian, 2025). If these structural impediments are not addressed, the conflict may formally cease for a Temporary period only to re-emerge after a while. Ultimately, the Washington Accords’ fate may depend less on what was signed in Washington and more on what happens in the contested hills of North Kivu and Ituri.

The Regional Economic Integration Framework (REIF), formally signed as part of the expanded Washington Accords in December 2025, establishes bilateral mechanisms for joint coordination in mineral supply chains, energy (including hydropower), infrastructure, national park management and tourism, and public health, ostensibly to formalize trade, curb illicit smuggling, and foster cross-border development contingent on prior implementation of the June security commitments such as troop withdrawals and FDLR neutralization (United States Department of State, 2025). The elite pact is exemplified in this economic pact through the prioritization of state-level and external interests in the acquisition of critical mineral access amid the competition in the global supply chain. The duties of the elites remain explicitly conditional on unfulfilled security provisions and excluding non-state armed actors like M23, whose ongoing offensives, including clashes around Uvira as recently as early January 2026, underscore the framework's fragility and risk of legitimizing resource exploitation without addressing root causes of instability, local grievances, or accountability for abuses, potentially perpetuating the cycle of temporary de-escalation followed by renewed violence seen in prior accords.

As events into early 2026 demonstrate, the structural weaknesses identified in the Washington Accords have manifested in renewed escalation: despite the December signing, M23 forces, whom were allegedly supported by Rwanda, maintained control over key cities like Goma and Bukavu, briefly seized Uvira in December 2025, and engaged in fresh clashes around the city in January 2026 amid stalled troop withdrawals and FDLR neutralization (Bwija, 2026). These developments underscore the risks of excluding non-state actors and relying on fragile enforcement, validating concerns that external economic ambitions may outpace genuine security progress.

## VII. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Accords signed in Washington between Kigali and the DRC represent a symbolic diplomatic win, albeit one built on a fragile framework in one of the most volatile regions in Africa. The potential for success lies in sustained high-level commitment and

an on-the-ground implementation. The contradictory ideological leanings of the two party government in the United States may limit the duration of the peace, particularly if a Democrat assumes the presidency. When President Barack Obama entered into a similar pact with Iran over its nuclear stockpile, Donald Trump later upon assuming office nullified it. While Trump touts this agreement as one of his major achievements in resolving a decades-old war, it remains uncertain whether a future administration will regard the Washington Accords as a policy priority?

For this agreement to avoid the fate of numerous failed accords, it must incorporate robust monitoring, inclusive dialogue involving armed groups and local communities, and mechanisms address human rights abuses, as meaningful reconciliation begins with accountability. A sustained, independent verification agency must operate effectively for the accord to have a realistic chance of survival, particularly as successive United States governments may pursue different priorities. The accord should undergo revisions to address its shortcomings, particularly its exclusion of armed and unarmed communities involved in the conflict. A robust economic integration framework should be pursued alongside governance reforms to reduce dependence on extractive mineral resources. The Great Lakes region can hope to transform this accords into lasting peace only through engagement by all parties.

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