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Rwanda's ambitions as a security provider in Sub-Saharan Africa

On 9 September 2022, a spokesperson for Benin's President Patrice Talon announced that the country was seeking logistical and military assistance from Rwanda for its conflict with jihadists operating in the northern region. Negotiations are ongoing, but if this deal is made, this would be the latest example of Rwanda using military diplomacy to cement links with other political leaders and bolster its reputation both within Sub-Saharan Africa and the global community. Traditionally, it has done so by supplying soldiers for multilateral peacekeeping operations, but as evidenced by its talks with Benin, it increasingly appears to be adopting a more bilateral approach, with interventions in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mozambique. At the same time, however, relations with some of its immediate neighbours remain poor. For example, politicians in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have accused Rwanda of deliberate destabilisation, and there is criticism of the authoritarian rule of President Paul Kagame. This duality is likely to persist while Kagame – who has been in power since 2000 and is likely to seek another term in office in 2024 – remains head of state.

Punching above its weight

Rwanda's military influence in Sub-Saharan Africa far outstrips its geographical and demographic size. In 2020, military spending accounted for 5.0% of total government expenditure, according to World Bank data (making it the 25th highest out of the 45 regional states for which data was available). But the overall size of its armed forces – with 33,000 active-duty soldiers in 2022 – is large given the country's relatively small population of about 13 million. This makes Rwanda's armed forces the 11th largest in the region, and it accounts for 0.6% of Rwanda's total labour force.

Moreover, the Rwanda Defence Force is highly trained and well equipped (though it is lightly mechanised and does not possess fixed-wing aircraft). This reflects the origins of the current Rwandan administration: key members fought during the 1980s as soldiers in Uganda's then-rebel National Resistance Army against the Milton Obote regime and against the Hutu-dominated regime responsible for the 1994 Rwandan genocide. This, and the Rwandan authorities' perception that the country

continues to face security threats on its borders, has led to a high-level commitment to the creation and maintenance of strong armed forces.

The armed forces have also played a key role in Kagame's aim to overcome Rwanda's political and economic isolation following the Rwandan genocide and to burnish its image amongst the international community. Thus, the armed forces' initial efforts focused on participation in multilateral operations under the aegis of the United Nations and African Union. Starting in 2005, Rwanda began to contribute military and police officers to UN operations and has since ramped up these contributions. By June 2022, it was the fourth-largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations worldwide and by far the largest contributor in Sub-Saharan Africa, with more than twice as many soldiers as the second-largest, Ghana. Rwandan contributions are heavily skewed towards the UN Mission in South Sudan and UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR, but its lack of presence in the UN mission in neighbouring DRC underscores the inter-governmental tensions between Rwanda and its immediate neighbours.

This approach has given Rwanda several advantages. Firstly, it has enabled the country to position itself as a trusted partner of the international community and has helped facilitate the strong inflows of bilateral aid and foreign direct investment that have driven Rwanda's strong economic growth (averaging about 7.7% a year since 2000). Secondly, it has allowed the government to use its participation in multilateral operations for political leverage in international affairs. For example, Kagame has threatened to withdraw Rwandan peacekeepers from Sudan on several occasions, including over allegations by the UN high commissioner for human rights that Rwandan soldiers were complicit in serious crimes in the DRC between 1994 and 2003. Thirdly, it has, according to critics, given the regime cover for a poor domestic human-rights record and its allegedly disruptive role within Central Africa. And, lastly, it has enabled the government to showcase the professionalism of Rwandan soldiers to other African administrations, thus helping facilitate a pivot towards deploying these soldiers unilaterally in countries across the region.

Moving towards unilateral deployments

In recent years, the Rwandan government has enlarged the Rwanda Defence Force's sphere of operations and started to move beyond operations as part of multilateral deployments. Kagame served as chairman of the African Union in 2019, during which time Rwanda signed a defence-cooperation agreement with the CAR, where it already had soldiers operating under the aegis of the UN stabilisation mission. Despite the mission's presence, however, the CAR's poorly trained national-security forces struggled to confront multiple security challenges, and these escalated in the run-up to its general election at the end of 2020. This prompted President Faustin-Archange Touadéra to seek additional external support from sources including the Wagner Group (a private mercenary organisation backed by the Russian state that has been operating in the CAR since 2017) and Rwanda.

Rwanda deployed a battalion, operating independently from obligations under the UN stabilisation mission to the CAR, and thwarted a twin-pronged rebel attack on the capital, Bangui. Rwandan soldiers now continue to patrol and keep open the 600-kilometre road between Bangui and Beloko on the border with Cameroon – a crucial supply route for the CAR that was previously subject to sustained rebel attacks. They might also have a role in protecting the planned transport corridor running between Pointe-Noire (an oil hub in the Republic of Congo), Bangui and N'djamena (Chad's capital). This transport corridor could create substantial trade opportunities in Central and East Africa, with Rwanda among the East African Community states well-placed to benefit from this.

Combined with other states in the East African Community, Rwanda appears to be seeking to create a security ring covering much of East and Central Africa. It plays a peacekeeping role in South Sudan, where Uganda is also helping support the government, and in the CAR. Meanwhile, Burundi, Kenya and Uganda are key contributors to the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia; and Kenya and Tanzania are contributing to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the DRC. Rwanda is also looking further afield, however, and is

Figure 1: 20 largest active-duty forces in Sub-Saharan Africa

Country	Active-duty force	
	Number of soldiers	Number of soldiers per 100,000 people
Eritrea	201,750	3,282
Nigeria	143,000	65
Ethiopia	138,000	124
Democratic Republic of the Congo	134,250	128
Angola	107,000	318
Sudan	104,300	223
South Africa	74,000	130
South Sudan	53,000	483
Uganda	45,000	101
Chad	33,250	191
Rwanda	33,000	255
Burundi	30,050	245
Zimbabwe	29,000	196
Côte d'Ivoire	27,000	96
Tanzania	27,000	43
Cameroon	25,400	89
Kenya	24,100	44
Mali	21,000	104
Ghana	15,500	48
Zambia	15,100	79

Source: IISS Military Balance+

attempting to present itself as a security provider outside the Great Lakes region.

In 2021, for example, the Mozambican government sought foreign assistance to counter a militant insurgency in the northern Cabo Delgado province that has led to substantial population displacement and delays in the development of the country's liquefied-natural-gas sector. As in the CAR, local soldiers (as well as the Wagner Group) struggled to deal with security challenges, and following talks between Kagame and Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi, Rwanda deployed a 1,000-strong contingent of the Rwanda Defence Force in July 2021. Soldiers from Rwanda, as well as members of the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique, have achieved some considerable successes. Just a month after being deployed, Rwandan forces, operating with the Mozambican army, recaptured Mocimboa da Praia – a district capital held by insurgents and a strategically significant town, given that its port and airport would be important for any revival of the multibillion-dollar liquefied-natural-gas project begun by Total Energies in Palma. The security situation remains challenging, however, with insurgents moving into new areas of the province (and neighbouring provinces such as Nampula and Niassa), suggesting that Rwandan engagement

in the country is unlikely to end soon. Indeed, in September 2022, the European Union announced that it would approve a €20m (US\$20.3m) financial package to support the Rwandan counter-insurgency mission in Mozambique. From Western states' perspectives, the Rwanda Defence Force is potentially acting as a proxy force protecting European (and, of course, Rwandan) interests. From a Rwandan perspective, this funding provides an EU endorsement of its operations in the country and bolsters its links with and reputation in the international community. In addition, while there is unlikely to be a publicised agreement, it is possible that Rwanda will receive preferential or discounted access to Mozambican gas once it becomes available.

At the other end of the continent, there are suggestions that Rwanda could provide logistical support – and potentially deploy a small contingent of around 350 soldiers – to Benin. As in Mozambique, the Beninese authorities are facing a destabilising Islamist insurgency. Negotiations are ongoing, but if confirmed, this would represent a further extension of Rwanda's military involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa. Given the minimal bilateral trade links between the two countries and Benin's lack of mineral resources, such involvement appears chiefly to reflect Rwanda's wish to bolster its reputation

as a key partner to the West in fighting insurgents, to further project its military power and to demonstrate its capabilities to any perceived opponents.

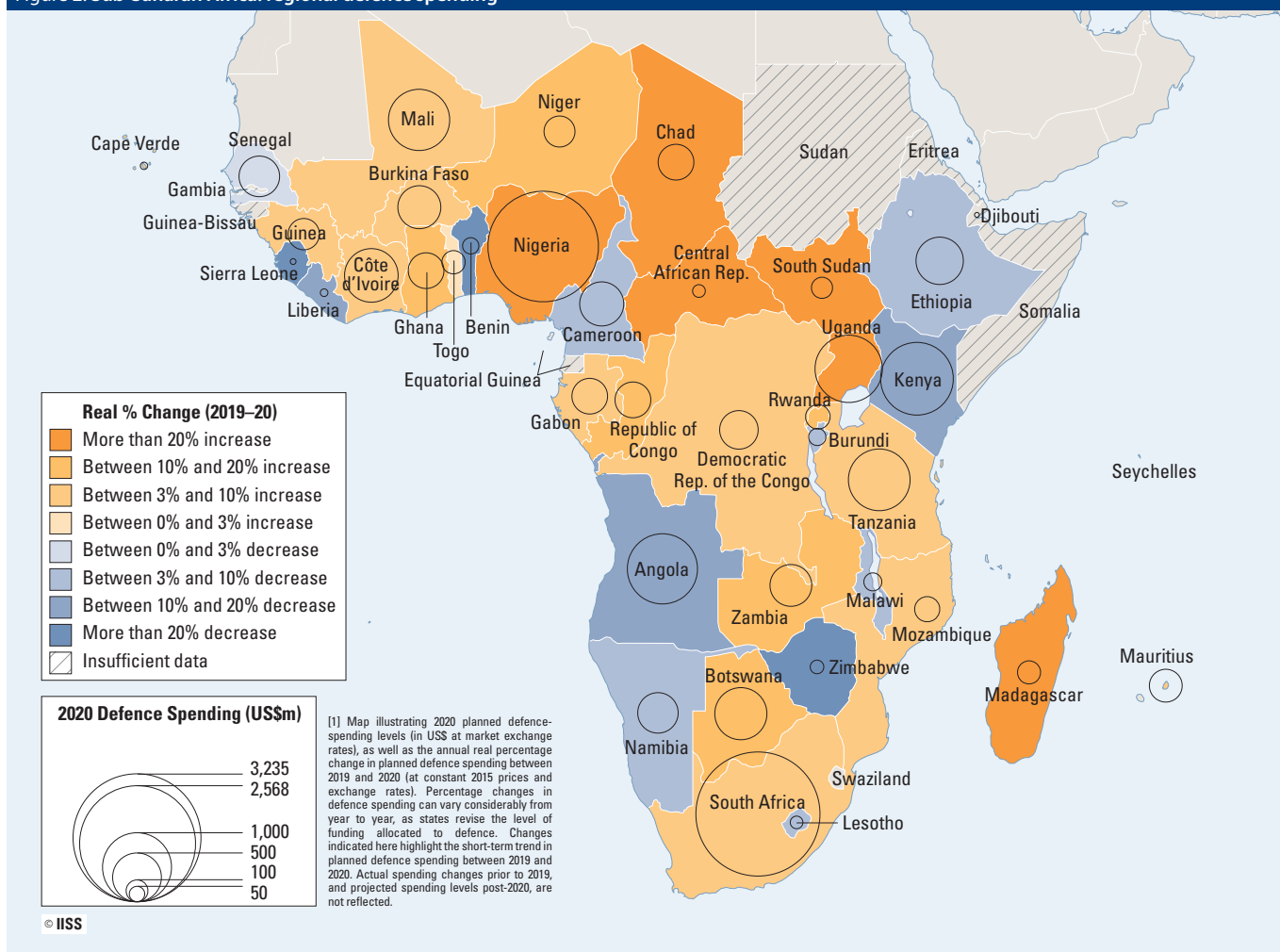
Destabilising its neighbours?

In contrast to its efforts to address instability in countries such as Mozambique, the CAR and Benin, Rwanda faces accusations of acting as a destabilising force in its immediate locale, where it has already been a key player in two major conflicts: the First Congo War and the Second Congo War. Bilateral relations with the DRC have remained tense since 1996, when Rwanda invaded what was then Zaire in pursuit of ethnic Hutus, whom it said were complicit in the genocide. This sparked the First Congo War (1996–97). The two states have not been in direct, outright conflict since the Second Congo War (1998–2003). However, relations have deteriorated substantially since the end of 2021, when the March 23 Movement militant group – previously thought largely defunct – carried out attacks on Congolese military positions in Chanzu and Runyonyi in North Kivu Province, close to the border with Rwanda and Uganda. In June 2022, Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi asserted that the Rwandan government was actively supporting the March 23 Movement, which claims to defend Tutsi interests in eastern DRC. And the Congolese government's Supreme Defence Council, chaired by Tshisekedi, ordered the suspension of all treaties with Rwanda, citing the alleged violation of the DRC's frontier and territorial integrity.

While Rwanda has consistently denied such allegations, a UN group of experts has stated that there is 'solid evidence' that Rwandan soldiers attacked soldiers inside the DRC and provided the March 23 Movement with weapons and support. In addition, Burundi has accused Rwanda of supporting RED-Tabara (a rebel group that has carried out several attacks in Burundi since 2015), and Uganda has accused Rwanda of supporting the Allied Democratic Forces (an Islamist rebel group considered a terrorist organisation by the Ugandan government). For its part, Rwanda has accused Burundi, the DRC and Uganda of supporting Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda ('the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda', an ethnic Hutu group active in eastern DRC).

Rwanda, like most of the other external actors in the DRC, has clear security motives for its presence, since rebel groups operating there launch periodic attacks on its soldiers and national territory. Rwanda and Uganda, in particular, also regard the Eastern Congo as a de facto extension of their own national territory, and the region has become a locus for competition – and on occasion proxy wars – between states. Competition for control of resources is also a key motivator, particularly given the

Figure 2: Sub-Saharan Africa: regional defence spending



Source: *The Military Balance 2022*

current geopolitical and energy dynamics. The DRC has substantial reserves of gold and oil, and it was the fourth-largest producer of diamonds in 2021, producing 14.1m carats that year. This was less than half the output of the biggest producer, Russia (39.1m carats), but any imposition of sanctions on the Russian diamond industry following the invasion of Ukraine would substantially increase demand for non-Russian supplies.

In addition, some 60% of global reserves of coltan (used in the production of smartphones) is located in the Kivu provinces, and a 2001 report by Amnesty International stated that 'by one estimate, the Rwandan army made at least US\$250m over 18 months through the sale of

coltan, even though no coltan is mined in Rwanda'. Demand for coltan has increased substantially since then. Equally, the DRC possesses more than 70% of the global supply of cobalt (used in rechargeable-battery electrodes). This nexus of economic and security interests suggests that Rwanda will continue to seek to play a major role in the DRC in the short to medium term, although full-scale conflict is relatively unlikely given that this would damage Rwanda's economic interests (by deterring investors and cutting trade links) and political support in the West.

Outlook

Rwanda's efforts to increase cooperation with other African states and with the

West reflect Kagame's determination to overcome Rwanda's relative structural weaknesses in terms of size and resources and to position himself as a capable and reliable leader. Given that this ambitious international strategy has largely benefitted Rwanda, Kagame's approach will probably remain the same throughout his tenure in office, which could continue for some time. The president has been in power since 2000 and, at 64, shows few signs of being prepared to step down. In 2015, the constitution was changed, allowing him to remain head of state until 2034, and in July 2022, he stated that he would stand at the next election (in 2024) and 'consider running for another 20 years'.

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