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# **Rwanda's Military Diplomacy** Kigali's Political Use of the Military Means to Increase Prestige and Influence in Africa and Beyond

Sub-Saharan  
Africa Center

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Federico DONELLI

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# Abstract

Although it is one of the smallest states on the African continent, Rwanda has adopted a proactive foreign policy. For several years, military diplomacy has been the cornerstone of Rwanda's international strategy. Kigali has deployed troops within the framework of multilateral peacekeeping missions to increase its prestige and influence. Since last year, Rwanda's approach has shown signs of change. Kigali has extended its activities outside of multilateral operations, intervening unilaterally in the Central African Republic (CAR) and then in Mozambique. Rwanda desires to foster its reputation as a regional and continental "security provider". For these reasons, Rwanda's political use of military tools is a fascinating example of African military diplomacy. What is the rationale behind Kigali's move? What are its purposes? And how does Rwanda intend to capitalize on the means of military diplomacy? The analysis explores Rwandan policy by seeking to understand its real potential and investigating the implications of Kigali's military diplomacy for the African security architecture.

# Résumé

Bien qu'il soit l'un des plus petits États du continent africain, le Rwanda a adopté une politique étrangère proactive. Depuis plusieurs années, la diplomatie militaire est la pierre angulaire de la stratégie internationale du Rwanda. Kigali a déployé des troupes dans le cadre de missions multilatérales de maintien de la paix afin d'accroître son prestige et son influence. Depuis l'année dernière, l'approche du Rwanda montre des signes de changement. Kigali a étendu ses activités en dehors des opérations multilatérales, intervenant unilatéralement en République centrafricaine (RCA), puis au Mozambique. Le Rwanda souhaite renforcer sa réputation de « pourvoyeur de sécurité » régional et continental. Pour ces raisons, l'utilisation politique d'outils militaires par le Rwanda est un exemple fascinant de diplomatie militaire africaine. Quelle est la logique derrière l'initiative de Kigali ? Quels sont ses objectifs ? Et comment le Rwanda entend-il tirer profit des moyens de la diplomatie militaire ? L'analyse examine la politique rwandaise en cherchant à comprendre son véritable potentiel et en étudiant les enjeux de la diplomatie militaire de Kigali pour l'architecture de sécurité africaine.

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# Introduction

Rwanda's commitment to several multinational peacekeeping and conflict management missions has generated much international attention.<sup>1</sup> Despite its small size and population, Rwanda's leadership, led by President Paul Kagame, has used its seasoned and professional armed forces as a tool to (re)enhance its regional and international standing. The contribution offered by Rwanda to multilateral operations sanctioned by the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU) on the continent and beyond has generated a favorable response – one that has helped tamp down criticism of Kagame's authoritarian rule and Rwandan military involvement in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Peacekeeping as part of multinational efforts in locations such as Sudan's Darfur region has resulted in praise from the UN for Kigali's deployment of over 6,500 military and police officers.<sup>2</sup>

The dispatch of Rwandan troops on a bilateral basis, beginning in 2020, to two African states highlights significant changes to Kigali's modus operandi as it broadens its military operations beyond the multilateral framework. Rwanda's actions, first, in the Central African Republic (CAR) and then Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province offer useful primers on the future design of Rwanda's foreign policy. They also, as importantly, point to what may become significant shifts in the ways conflict management and peacebuilding are prosecuted in Sub-Saharan Africa. Further, Rwanda's political use of military tools is a fascinating example of African military diplomacy.<sup>3</sup>

Since the 1994 genocide, Kagame's aim has been to rebuild a stable and strong state. In turn, Kagame and his ruling party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), aim to increase Rwanda's prestige through the country's contributions to peacekeeping missions in conflict zones. Implementing a military diplomacy approach has been possible thanks to the skills shown in different scenarios of intervention by its army: the Rwanda Defence Forces (RDF). Indeed, the RDF is a professional, highly trained, well-equipped,

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1. See for example, A. Cascais, "Rwanda's Military Intervention in Mozambique Raises Eyebrows", DW News, August 24, 2021, available at: [www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com).

2. UN Peacekeeping, Rwanda, 2019, available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org>.

3. In the extant literature, there is no uniform consensus on the meaning of the military diplomacy category. This analysis applies it as a field of diplomacy that focuses primarily on the pursuit of foreign policy interests of the state in the area of security and defense policy. It includes the set of activities carried out mainly by the representatives of the defense department. On this issue see, E. Pajtinka, "Military Diplomacy and Its Present Functions: Security Dimensions", *International and National Studies*, 2016, No. 20, pp. 179–194.

and integrated force (both Rwanda's major ethnic groups, the Hutu and Tutsi, serve together). Since 2005, the RDF's deployments mean that it has come to be viewed by African and international bodies as a reliable force for peacekeeping. But Kagame's recent decisions to send contingents to both the CAR and Mozambique demonstrate that he sees the RDF as something of a new African security provider for the continent. Therefore, Rwanda has exploited the capabilities of its military apparatus as a political tool to gain greater international visibility and continental influence.

The RDF's deployment, particularly in Cabo Delgado, has been very effective.<sup>4</sup> Its success against violent non-state armed actors has not only generated a great deal of positive press but has resulted in Rwanda strengthening its political and economic ties with the other African states. At the same time, Kigali has become a trustworthy interlocutor for external states such as France. At the root of Rwanda's strategy is Kagame's highly ambitious project. The Rwandan regime aspires to promote "a Rwandan military solution to security problems" as an alternative to the architecture promoted by regional and continental organizations. The three pillars of Rwanda's strategy are rapid response capability (crisis management element), training of indigenous forces in counterinsurgency (long lasting deterrent), and economic partnership (preventive element). The economic dimension is an essential component of Kigali's strategy that should be emphasized on par with political gains. Kagame understands that taking on the burden of stabilization missions in crisis scenarios where others have failed can accrue numerous advantages for Rwanda, particularly as its unilateral actions support the interests of powerful international stakeholders such as multinational oil firms or states. Although they recognize the value of regional organizations such as the AU and Southern African Development Community (SADC), Kagame and his RPF are aware of the inherent limits of the multilateral approach. For this reason, they have the ambition to promote a model that is a potential alternative to AU's African Peace and Security Architecture. According to the Rwandan executive, the "African solutions to African problems" approach can and must transcend – even supersede – the established multilateral frameworks. Kagame's new approach, on display in the CAR and Cabo Delgado, can be seen as either contradicting the (AU)'s policies of recent years through the unilateral deployment of RDF troops to other African states or complementing them through the RDF's assistance (albeit operating autonomously) to regional or continental missions.<sup>5</sup> In addition, and demonstrating a stark break from the past, the promotion of change in conflict management from multinational to unilateral – and by a small

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4. J. Hanlon, "Insurrection au Mozambique: pourquoi le Rwanda mène la riposte?", BBC Afrique, August 8, 2021, available at: [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com).

5. P.-S. Handy, "Rwanda: The emergence of an African 'Smart Power'", *ISS Brief*, September 27, 2021, available at: <https://issafrika.org>.

state, no less – has triggered a bottom-up dynamic. Rwanda's novel, unilateral approach to conflicts outside its neighborhood (the Great Lakes region) and via the deployment of its armed forces has the ambition to present itself as a potential operational model south of the Sahara.

This analysis is organized into four sections. The first part discusses Rwanda's politico-military trajectory following the 1994 Rwanda Genocide. A few distinctive traits that have given the RDF international visibility within multilateral operations are traceable in its trajectory from a resistance force to the official army. The second section explores the recent shift in the Rwandan approach to armed conflicts in sub-Saharan African states. The intervention in the CAR and Mozambique highlights Kigali's willingness to promote an alternative security model. The RDF's actions in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province and their success against armed insurgents are explored in greater depth in the report's third section. The conclusion provides analysis about Rwanda's pro-active use of its military in extra-regional states and what the implications may become at the regional, continental, and extra-continental levels.



# The RDF's Path: From a Resistance Force to a Peacekeeping Force

As the Cold War ended, the effects of structural adjustment took hold and new distributions of power emerged globally, many African leaders understood the need to implement independent efforts aimed at prevention, management, and the resolution of crises. Accordingly, an increasing number of African states began to contribute to peacekeeping missions on the continent.<sup>6</sup> Initially, these were mainly countries with large geographies and populations such as Ethiopia. Subsequently, this number increased.<sup>7</sup> In the second half of the 1990s, the outbreak of various inter-state and internal conflicts, including the Rwandan Genocide, convinced the main continental organization, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), to open a debate on the need to develop specifically African mechanisms to successfully face and resolve crises. The debate led to the adoption of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) Protocol in 2002. The PSC constituted the backbone of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) aimed at preventing, managing, and resolving crises and conflicts, post-conflict reconstruction, and development in the continent. The APSA had the merit of introducing the first indigenous African structure designed to implement a comprehensive peace and security agenda.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the OAU's approach, the security architecture promoted within the newly named African Union (AU) shifted away from the principle of non-interference in favor of a more interventionist approach.<sup>9</sup> The AU's missions in Burundi (2003), Sudan (2004) and Somalia (2007) represented the renewed desire of African states to disengage from external powers, often former colonial states, or a West-dominated UN, to resolve continental crises. However, the constraints of APSA quickly became evident. Dependence on international stakeholders for funding and materiel was neither severed nor diminished.<sup>10</sup> At the same

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6. M. D. Rettig, "The Evolution of African Peacekeeping", African Center for Strategic Studies, May 26, 2016, available at: <https://africacenter.org>.

7. A. van Nieuwkerk, "The Regional Roots of the African Peace and Security Architecture: Exploring Centre-Periphery Relations", *South African Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2011, pp. 169-189.

8. U. Engel and J. Gomes Porto, "Imagining, Implementing, and Integrating the African Peace and Security Architecture: The African Union's Challenges", *African Security*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2014, pp. 135-146.

9. The OAU's name was changed to the AU in 2002.

10. M. Gebrehiwot Berhe, "The African Peace and Security Architecture", World Peace Foundation, Paper No. 1, June 2016.

time, the AU's inner political dynamics led to an excessive dependence on larger African states such as Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa, which resulted in their already outsized influence within the AU being enhanced.

After having participated within this general framework for over a decade, Rwanda has gradually begun to detach itself by taking control of both the peacekeeping operation's military composition and its agenda. To accomplish its chosen role – one that belies its miniscule size and is beyond the capacities of most other small states – the RPF has exploited the efficiency and capabilities of the RDF. Acting as mutually constitutive forces within Rwanda, both the RPF and RDF have formed the pillars of governance and security in post-genocide Rwanda – benefitting politically and economically in the process.<sup>11</sup>

The RDF (Kinyarwanda: *Ingabo z'u Rwanda*), as an institution, possesses peculiar traits when compared to other African militaries. Unique to the Great Lakes region and East Africa, for instance, the RDF does not trace its roots to colonial-era military structures like those in neighboring Uganda and Burundi.<sup>12</sup> Nor does it have much in common with the Hutu-led *Forces Armées Rwandaises* (FAR) that was established following independence in 1962. Rather, the RDF's roots are found in Uganda's National Resistance Army (NRA). During the 1980s, several members of the current RPF, including Kagame, fought with the Ugandan rebels against the regime of Milton Obote. They were mostly Rwandan Tutsis who came as refugees to Uganda's southwestern provinces following the 1959 Hutu revolution. Over the years, the conditions of exile and marginalization were partly overcome by inclusion in the NRA and the ethno-linguistic affinities with Uganda's Banyankole tribe. After the Ugandan civil war ended in 1984, Rwandan NRA members founded the RPF and its armed wing, the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), and turned their efforts in affecting deep political changes within Rwanda.<sup>13</sup> As violence escalated in Rwanda in the early 1990s, the RPA acquired an ethnic-regional identity, integrating Tutsis from Burundi and Zaire (today's Democratic Republic of the Congo, DRC).<sup>14</sup> The armed actions of the RPA culminated in the overthrow of a Hutu-dominated regime and brought an end to the Rwanda Genocide in which as many as 1 million died, 500,000-800,000 of which were ethnic Tutsis. A decade-long transition took place in Rwanda as Kagame and the RPF, assisted by the RPA, attempted to put Rwanda back together again. During those years, the Rwandan forces were heavily involved in the DRC (at that time Zaire), where Hutus had found refuge. In 1996, the RPA

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11. D. Beswick, "The Risks of African Military Capacity Building: Lessons from Rwanda", *African Affairs*, Vol. 113, No. 451, 2014, pp. 212-231.

12. G. Prunier, "The Armies of the Great Lakes Countries", *PRISM*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2017, pp. 99-111.

13. *Ibid.*

14. F. Reyntjens, "Waging (Civil) War Abroad: Rwanda and the DRC", in S. Straus and L. Waldorf (eds.), *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011, pp. 132-151.

entered the North and South Kivu provinces to destroy the remaining forces of the former Rwandan regime that fled to the DRC after the genocide. A coalition composed of Rwanda, Uganda, and the Congolese rebels AFDL (Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo) led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila marched towards Kinshasa, carrying out a series of sweeps of Hutus. In May 1997, these military actions led to the fall of Mobutu Sese Seko's regime and Kabila became president. The rift between Kabila and his two backers, Uganda and Rwanda, triggered the Second Congo War (1998-2003). During this conflict, the Rwandan army launched an ambitious and unsuccessful operation to take over the DRC capital, Kinshasa (1998), fought against its former allies, the Ugandan People's Defence Forces, and plundered Eastern Congo.<sup>15</sup> The Rwandan regime also increased its grip over the provinces of North and South Kivu through alliances with various armed groups, including Tutsi militias of the Congolese Banyamulenge and the RCD (Rally for Congolese Democracy) rebels.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the Congo war years were helpful for the new Rwandan leadership to promote the reintegration of the Hutu majority both socially and ideologically through nationalist propaganda known as *Ingando*.<sup>17</sup> At the end of the transition phase in 2003, the RPA was renamed the RDF. It assumed a more national connotation with the highly successful inclusion of many former Hutu officers as well as newly recruited soldiers.

Beginning in 2005, the RDF assumed its new role as an instrument used to further Kagame's continental and international agenda. The need to reestablish severed political ties, overcome Rwanda's economic isolation, and the desire to rebrand the country's poor image influenced the newly elected Kagame to begin the RDF's active involvement in multilateral operations. Rwanda did so first under the auspices of the UN, and, in a short period, Rwandan troops received much praise, especially for their skill in transnational mediations and operations in civil war contexts.<sup>18</sup> The RDF's expertise and discipline have been noticed and are in stark contrast with other peacekeeping contingents. In particular, the Rwandan peacekeepers have not been involved in the repetitive sex abuses that have tarnished the UN peacekeeping missions in Africa and embarrassed the UN Security Council.<sup>19</sup> To date, over six thousand RDF soldiers have been or are

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15. Report of the panel of experts on the illegal exploitation of natural resources and other forms of wealth of the Democratic Republic of Congo, UN Security Council, 12 April 2001.

16. H. Weiss, *War and Peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikaninstitutet, 2000.

17. M. E. Desrosiers and S. Thompson, "Rhetorical Legacies of Leadership: Projections of 'Benevolent Leadership' in Pre- and Post-Genocide Rwanda", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 2011, pp. 429-453.

18. D. Beswick, "The Role of the Military in Contemporary Rwanda", in M. Campioni and P. Noack (eds.), *Rwanda Fast Forward: Social, Economic, Military and Reconciliation Prospects*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 249-264.

19. E. Picco and T. Vircoulon, "La Minusca en Centrafrique : les Casques bleus impopulaires", *Notes de l'Ifri*, March 2021.

still involved in multilateral operations, including those conducted in Mali and Darfur. Rwanda is currently the fifth-largest contributor to UN missions globally, and the second-largest continental contributor behind Ethiopia.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 1: Rwandan Personnel Deployed in UN Missions**

UN MISSION	RWANDA PERSONNEL
BINUH (HAITI)	1
MINUSCA (CAR)	2,201
UNMIS (S.SUDAN)	3,082
UNISFA (SUDAN)	15
UNAMID (DARFUR)	<u>Completed 2020</u>

Source: United Nations.

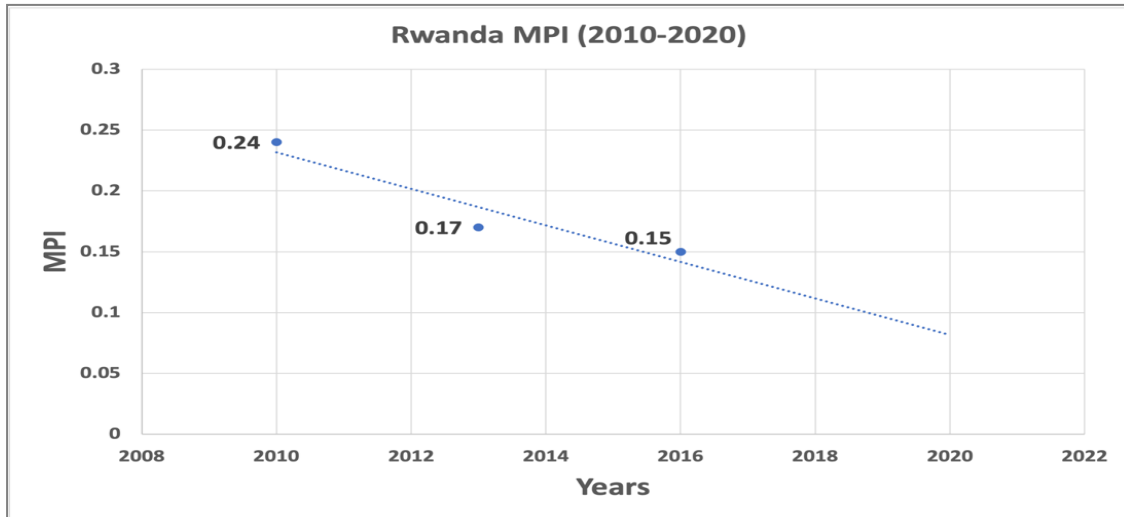
As mentioned earlier, Kigali's increasing commitment to multinational peacekeeping missions was due to a desire as well as a need to strengthen Rwanda's foreign relations and boost the country's image. From a merely political point of view, the post-civil war period has been distinguished by the new regime's quest for legitimacy and international support. Rwanda's rebirth would not have been possible without the contribution of international stakeholders. The country, led uninterruptedly since 2000 by current president Kagame, leader of the RPF, has managed in a few years to achieve a durable economic performance, which has led to a reduction in poverty rates.<sup>21</sup> The economic growth trajectory has been fueled almost exclusively, however, by foreign aid and investment. Simultaneously, the country's internal order and security have increased thanks to successful reforms in the realm of public security. Some studies have considered the fast consolidation of Rwandan political and economic stability as a model of success to which other African countries could look.<sup>22</sup>

20. C. Felter and D. Renwick, "The Role of Peacekeeping in Africa", Council on Foreign Relations, October 5, 2021, available at: [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

21. See Figures 2 and 3.

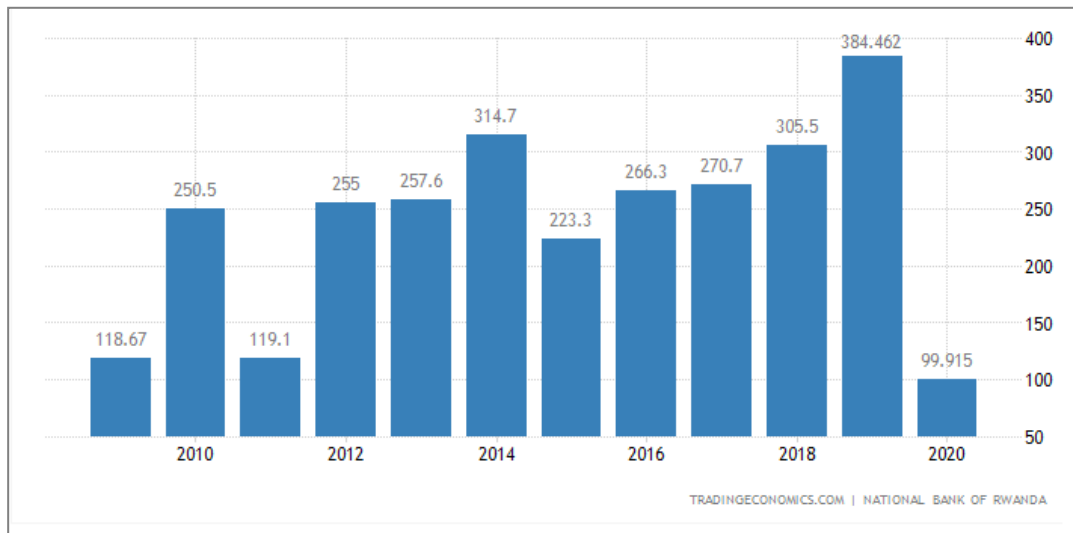
22. J. Porte, "Rwanda: An Effective Development Model, Rising to the Challenge of Its Sustainability", *Macroeconomics & Development*, No. 32, March 2021.

**Figure 2: Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) – Rwanda (2010-2020)**



Source: Trading Economics.

**Figure 3: Foreign Direct Investment in Rwanda (2009-2020)**



Source: Trading Economics.

These successes have nevertheless generated a twofold side effect for Rwanda. On the one hand, economic development has generated a relationship of dependence on outside parties, namely multinational donors such as the UN, external state aid agencies like USAID, and NGOs. On the other hand, the considerable amounts of resources coming from abroad

have assisted Rwanda's post genocide elite, largely composed of former RPA fighters, to consolidate their power within Rwandan society.<sup>23</sup> This same elite, with Kagame at the helm, are today's titular members of the RPA and RDF.

The largesse from abroad,<sup>24</sup> generated by the RPF's successes in governing a peaceful Rwanda since 1994, is beginning to dry up, however, on account of concerns – primarily from Western donors – about the country's lack of human rights and the failure of democratization efforts.<sup>25</sup> In short, critics argue that the RPF has failed to implement an effective agenda for democratic development. Indeed, the positive image that Kigali has cultivated internationally is being muddied following what many see as the repression of all forms of dissent.<sup>26</sup> As such, the continued deployment of Rwandan troops can be understood, in part, as a pressure release valve, one that helps dispel the sting of international criticism and shields Kagame and his regime. Indeed, like many other leaders,<sup>27</sup> Kagame has dispatched RDF troops to multilateral missions in order to divert Rwandan public and international attention from the country's domestic problems. Moreover, Rwanda uses its peacekeeping contributions as leverage with international donors. Western donors have repeatedly threatened to reduce aid due to what they see as human rights violations.<sup>28</sup> Kagame, in turn, has threatened to withdraw the RDF from multilateral operations. This dynamic, for example, played out when Rwanda interfered in the DRC's political affairs, as detailed below.

A few years after the Second Congo War, Kigali supported the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP), a Tutsi armed group based in the North Kivu province. In 2009, the CNDP signed a peace treaty with the government, in which it agreed to integrate into the Congolese army.<sup>29</sup> A few years later, the Rwandan government supported another Tutsi-led armed group in North Kivu (the March 23 Movement, M23), in order to maintain its political clout in Congolese domestic affairs. Between 2010 and 2012, several African and Western countries repeatedly criticized Kigali's

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23. S. Takeuchi, "Development and Developmentalism in Post-genocide Rwanda", in Y. Takagi, V. Kanchoochat and T. Sonobe (eds.), *Developmental State Building*, Singapore: Springer, 2019, pp. 121-134.

24. Foreign Direct Investment in Rwanda averaged 238.81 USD Million from 2009 until 2020, reaching an all-time high of 384.46 USD Million in 2019 and a record low of 99.92 USD Million in 2020. The big part of this investment came from European countries (32%), followed by East African Community (EAC) with (14%). See Figure 3. Sources: National Bank of Rwanda, National Institute for Statistics of Rwanda, World Bank.

25. M. Rafti, "A Perilous Path to Democracy: Political Transition and Authoritarian Consolidation in Rwanda", *IOB Discussion Papers*, No. 3, 2008, available at: <https://ideas.repec.org>.

26. Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2020, "BTI 2020 Country Report – Rwanda", 2020, available at: <https://bti-project.org>.

27. E. F. Kisangani and J. Pickering, "Diverting with Benevolent Military Force: Reducing Risks and Rising above Strategic Behavior", *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2007, pp. 277-299.

28. O. S. McDoom, "To Aid, or Not to Aid? The Case of Rwanda", *Governance, Economic Development*, April 29, 2013, available at: <https://unu.edu>.

29. B. Shepherd, "Congo, Rwanda and the National Congress for the Defence of the People", *Conciliation Resources*, No. 22, 2011.

support for armed groups in its neighbor, the DRC.<sup>30</sup> When the M23, composed of former officers and soldiers of the Congolese Army, occupied, in 2012, the city of Goma, capital of the North Kivu province, Kagame presented himself as an interlocutor between M23 and the DRC's government in Kinshasa. Nevertheless, it became clear that the RPF was supporting the rebel group financially. Behind Kigali's strategy was the quest for more influence in the neighboring country and the countering of the activities of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). The FDLR is an armed movement composed of ethnic Hutus, including several accused genocide perpetrators.

In 2012 and 2013, President Kagame leveraged both the role of RDF troops in peacekeeping missions and Rwanda's non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council to neutralize criticism emanating primarily from the US and the EU. During the same period, a report published by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights uncovered numerous abuses perpetrated by Rwandan troops against Hutu refugees in the DRC during the first and second Congo wars.<sup>31</sup>

The reaction of Rwanda and its president was twofold. On the one side, the Rwandan government officially denied the findings of the UN report and ascribed it to a genocide negationist narrative. On the other, and off the record, Kagame reportedly threatened to withdraw Rwandan troops deployed as part of the UN-AU Mission in Darfur (UNAMID).<sup>32</sup> Quickly learning from this scenario, Rwanda's elites realized the potential political influence that could be accrued via deployment of the RDF abroad in both a unilateral and multilateral setting.

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30. M. Schneider, "Examining the Role of Rwanda in the DRC Insurgency", International Crisis Group, September 19, 2012, available at: [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org).

31. UNHR, "Report of the Mapping Exercise: Democratic Republic of Congo 1993-2003", United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, August 2010, available at: [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org).

32. J. Gettleman and J. Kron, "Rwanda Threatens to Pull Peacekeepers from Darfur", *The New York Times*, August 31, 2010, available at: [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

# The Turning Point of Rwanda's Approach and the Emergence of a Regional Security Model

Since mid-2020, Rwanda's approach to RDF deployments and conflict management has shown significant signs of change. While the Kigali government has not revised its commitment to multilateral missions, Kagame has shown his country's willingness to deploy RDF troops outside the multilateral operational and legal frameworks. This trend underscores Rwanda's increasingly adventurous foreign policy – particularly when compared to other Sub-Saharan African states.

The two continental crises to which the RDF unilaterally deployed were in the CAR and Mozambique, as noted previously. In the case of the CAR, a state sandwiched between the violent Lake Chad region to the north and west and South Sudan and the DRC to the east and south, the past two decades have been ferociously unstable. During the winter of 2012, for example, a predominantly Muslim armed insurgent group, known as the Séléka, led to the fall of then-President François Bozizé and heralded the outbreak of the Central African Republic conflict, which remains ongoing. In 2014, in light of rising humanitarian and security concerns, the UNSC authorized the deployment of a peacekeeping mission: the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). Since the operation's launch, Rwanda has been one of the states that has contributed the most in terms of troops. Peace agreements have been signed between the government and the many armed groups active in the country, but then broken many times. Bozizé's former Prime Minister, Faustin-Archange Touadéra was elected in 2016. Nevertheless the elections were followed by surges of violence, and various armed groups remain in control of large swathes of the country. To date, 14,275 peacekeepers have been deployed to the country under the UN's mission<sup>33</sup>. Among them are nearly two thousand RDF soldiers. They reportedly have formed the backbone of MINUSCA and are in charge of Touadéra's security and that of the presidential palace.

In the face of resurgent rebel activity and a coup reportedly led by Bozizé in late 2020,<sup>34</sup> President Touadéra began to explore alternative

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33. Source: <https://minusca.unmissions.org>.

34. K. Asala, "CAR: Government Denounces Ex-President's *Coup d'état* Attempt", *Africa News*, December 20, 2020, available at: [www.africanews.com](http://www.africanews.com).



security arrangements that went beyond MINUSCA. Having a close relationship with Moscow, Bangui initially looked for assistance from the so-called Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary organization with strong ties to the Kremlin,<sup>35</sup> which some see as a private military company (or private military contracting agency).<sup>36</sup> Wagner affiliated mercenaries reportedly trained elements of the CAR military and attempted to fill the gap left, in part, by the departure of French forces in 2016.<sup>37</sup> Touadéra also approached Kagame and made a request for the urgent deployment of more RDF troops to the CAR.<sup>38</sup> Kagame complied and the threat from Bozizé and rebel groups affiliated with him was dispelled as Rwandan troops and Wagner mercenaries quickly retook various rebel-held towns such as the CAR's fourth largest city, Bambari. The RDF has also deployed several units, especially in the border areas with Cameroon, to ensure the security of supply lines to Bangui from the west.<sup>39</sup>

The Rwandan government subsequently signed bilateral security agreements with the CAR that guaranteed the deployment of new RDF troops – dubbed “force protection troops” by Kigali. By August 2021, the two African countries had strengthened relations with a new agreement that included several sectors beyond the military.<sup>40</sup> Rwanda then sent more troops to support the government and MINUSCA. The two bilateral agreements allowed Rwanda to increase its presence in the CAR. However, the agreements between Kigali and Bangui have not only increased the number of troops but also redefined the legal framework within which they operate on the CAR's soil. Rwandan troops now operate in the CAR largely beyond MINUSCA's rules of engagement, leading to autonomy of action and greater discretion in the use of force.

The actions and results obtained by the RDF divisions deployed to the CAR (in a very short amount of time) as well as Kagame's willingness to deploy the RDF outside Rwanda's Great Lakes region in a non-multilateral fashion quickly captured the attention of other African leaders. Among

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35. C. Rondeaux, “Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare”, *New America*, November 7, 2019, available at: [www.newamerica.org](http://www.newamerica.org). See also, S. Sukhankin, “Russian Private Military Contractors in Sub-Saharan Africa: Strengths, Limitations and Implications”, *Russie.NEI.Visions*, Ifri, No. 120, September 2020, available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org); A. Mackinnon, “Russia's Wagner Group Doesn't Actually Exist”, *Foreign Policy*, July 6, 2021, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

36. “Wagner Group: Why the EU Is Alarmed by Russian Mercenaries in Central Africa”, *BBC News*, December 19, 2021, available at: [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com).

37. “France to End Central African Republic Military Mission in 2016”, *France 24*, March 30, 2016, available at: [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com).

38. “Présidentielle en Centrafrique: le Rwanda et la Russie envoient des troupes”, *Jeune Afrique*, December 21, 2020, available at: [www.jeuneafrique.com](http://www.jeuneafrique.com).

39. I. R. Mugisha, “Rwanda Deploys Troops to CAR under Bilateral Arrangement”, *The East African*, December 22, 2020, available at: [www.theeastafrican.co.ke](http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke).

40. L. Broulard, “RCA : comment les Casques bleus rwandais renforcent la coopération entre Bangui et Kigali”, *RFI*, August 4, 2021, available at: [www.rfi.fr](http://www.rfi.fr).

them was Mozambique's President, Filipe Nyusi, who had faced, since 2017, an increasingly violent and successful armed insurgency – the Islamist group, Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jamaah (ASWJ) – in the northern region of Cabo Delgado.<sup>41</sup> By early 2021, ASWJ rebels had advanced from their bases in the bush and captured the key city of Palma. It is nearby to natural gas extraction facilities located off the coast of Mozambique and the billion-dollar project of French hydrocarbon giant, Total. As ASWJ enforced its rule, numerous civilians were killed – with some of the victims later found beheaded.

Until the loss of Palma, the Mozambican authorities had undertaken several counter-insurgency operations on their own. In this, they relied on Mozambique's Armed Defense Forces (FADM) complemented by foreign paramilitary forces such as the aforementioned Wagner Group from Russia and the Dyck Advisory Group from neighboring South Africa. Despite the actions of almost twelve thousand soldiers – both FADM forces and mercenaries – involved in the anti-ASWJ operation, the Islamist group fought back, and the conflict expanded to include six regional districts.<sup>42</sup> The Wagner Group, ill-prepared and lacking aerial support was reportedly ineffective against ASWJ, with at least two mercenaries, possibly more, killed. They quickly reduced their presence.<sup>43</sup> Mercenaries associated with the Dyck Advisory Group also encountered difficulties, but they largely operated from a few helicopters and rarely engaged with ASWJ directly.<sup>44</sup>

The entry of Islamist forces in Palma convinced Nyusi to request the help of Rwanda, as detailed below. At the same time, facing increasing pressure from a combination of France's Total, the US, the AU, and the SADC, Nyusi was compelled to engage with a South African-dominated SADC.<sup>45</sup> Nyusi also called on the assistance of Mozambique's colonial rulers, Portugal, which promoted the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) with its European partners but offered no troops to battle ASWJ.<sup>46</sup>

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41. ASWJ is often referred to as Islamic State – Central Africa Province (IS-CAP). I continue to refer to the Islamist group as ASWJ because: “Although Islamic State adopted ASWJ in June 2019 as the Mozambican wing of its Central Africa Province, the ties between Islamic State Central and the group remain nebulous.” See S. Lister, “Jihadi Insurgency in Mozambique Grows in Sophistication and Reach”, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 13, No. 10, 2020, pp. 1-56 and 35-36, available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu>.

42. “Stemming the Insurrection in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado”, *Africa Report*, No. 303, Crisis Group, June 11, 2021, available at: <https://d2071andvipowj.cloudfront.net>.

43. S. Lister, “Jihadi Insurgency in Mozambique Grows in Sophistication and Reach”, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 13, No. 10, 2020, pp. 1-56 and 42, available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu>.

44. *Ibid.*

45. The SADC is an inter-governmental organization with the goal to further regional socio-economic cooperation and integration as well as political and security cooperation among 16 countries in southern Africa. Mozambique is an SADC member. See A. Tijani, “Mozambique: face aux jihadistes, les troupes de la SADC peuvent-elles pallier l'échec de l'armée?”, *Jeune Afrique*, July 9, 2021, available at: [www.jeuneafrique.com](http://www.jeuneafrique.com).

46. J. Barigazzi, “Portugal Wants EU to Help Mozambique Military Fight Jihadists”, *Politico*, March 12, 2021, available at: [www.politico.eu](http://www.politico.eu).

The SADC had long been eager to launch a multinational mission to avoid the risk of contagion of instability in the area. It approved the launch of what it termed the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) with about 3,000 soldiers belonging to various member states, including Angola and South Africa, and the mission was officially implemented in July 2021. Yet, as the South African-led operational command in charge of SAMIM planned its deployment, several RDF officers were already discreetly conducting reconnaissance visits on Mozambican soil. At the beginning of July, only a few days after the SAMIM operations began, approximately one thousand RDF soldiers were deployed from Rwanda to Cabo Delgado.<sup>47</sup> The RDF-led operations that ensued in Mozambique proved even more successful than those in CAR, and quickly helped to reverse the gains made by ASWJ.<sup>48</sup> One RDF group moved from the north of the province, near Palma, for instance. A second group advanced from the southwest of the province, with both RDF divisions moving towards the port city of Mocímboa da Praia, which they took from ASWJ on August 8. The militants fled south with approximately 100 killed; the RDF lost only four men in the skirmishes with the ASWJ, and the victorious RDF troops were greeted by locals as liberators.<sup>49</sup> They also pacified and assumed control of Palma, establishing a 50-km-long safety zone so Total and other international hydrocarbon companies could begin to think about restarting major gas projects.<sup>50</sup> The RDF had largely and efficiently pushed back the ASWJ's insurgency where others had spectacularly failed.

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47. C. Uwiringiyimana, "Rwanda Deploys Troops to Mozambique to Help Fight Insurgency", Reuter, July 9, 2021, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

48. L. Broulard, "Avec son intervention militaire au Mozambique, le Rwanda élargit sa zone d'influence", *Le Monde*, September 29, 2021, available at: [www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr).

49. A. Soy, "Mozambique Crisis: Sex-slave Freeing Rwandan Soldiers Greeted as Heroes", BBC, October 6, 2021, available at: [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com).

50. A. Cascais, "Rwanda's Military Intervention in Mozambique Raises Eyebrows", DW, August 24, 2021, available at: [www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com).

# The Peculiarities of the Rwandan Approach: The CAR and Cabo Delgado Cases

The expertise shown by the RDF in the first results achieved against non-state armed actors in the CAR were not lost on Nyusi. Another determinant, however, was the Mozambican President's preference for the deployment of troops based on bilateral agreements versus a multilateral deployment<sup>51</sup>. Despite the historical and mutual support between the African National Congress (ANC) and FRELIMO leadership, Nyusi's worries about SAMIM stemmed from a belief shared by many African leaders, who feel that the presence of foreign troops within the framework of bilateral agreements undermines State authority less than missions promoted by regional or international organizations do.<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, Nyusi chose to initiate secret contacts with Kagame.<sup>53</sup> Rwanda's ambassador to Mozambique, Claude Nikobisanzwe, also favored the talks. He is known to be close to Kagame and one of the promoters of the RPF's new, proactive foreign policies.

The decisions taken by Kagame and pushed by the likes of Nikobisanzwe and others in the RPF, demonstrate a modification in Kigali's overall strategy of engagement on the continent and with external states. They also show a changed purpose. Rwanda aims to present itself as a security provider in regions outside the Great Lakes.<sup>54</sup> Rwanda's ambitious plan embodies Kagame's desire to interpret and operationalize the principle of "African solutions to African problems." He intends to promote an alternative Rwandan security model to the APSA. This involves the Rwanda's rapid military deployment capabilities based on bilateral agreements. It also comprises the training of local forces as well as Rwanda's economic entry into the target states.

Rwanda's military diplomacy also implies a change of image, both on the continent and internationally. The RDF's increasing engagement in continental peacekeeping missions was part of the broader framework of

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51. B. Mpofu, "Mozambique Is Still Resisting Southern Africa's Help in Fighting Terrorism", City Press, May 2, 2021, available at: [www.news24.com](http://www.news24.com).

52. N. Chingono, "SADC Is Welcome, but Mozambique's Sovereignty Comes First – Nyusi", City Press, April 11, 2021, available at: [www.news24.com](http://www.news24.com).

53. "Comment Kigali exporte son savoir-faire militaire sur le continent", Africa Intelligence, December 10, 2021.

54. R. Gras, "Rwanda : du Mozambique à la Centrafrique, les raisons du déploiement tous azimuts de Kigali", *Jeune Afrique*, August 11, 2021, available at: [www.jeuneafrique.com](http://www.jeuneafrique.com).

reviving the country's image or brand diplomacy. Currently, Kagame wishes to not only improve his country's image (and protect himself from criticism), but to project what he understands as Rwanda's unique brand as an African security provider for African problems. This is a continuation of his efforts to change the perception of international stakeholders who still associate the country with the genocide. Rwanda is no longer a source of insecurity and destabilization as it was in the DRC from 1996 to 2012, but, on the contrary, is a stable, secure country able to provide security and order to other African states.

As much as Rwanda's interventions in the CAR and Mozambique seem very different from each other, they share common traits that help shed light on Kigali's broader strategy. The first shared trait concerns geographic proximity. Both countries do not have immediate borders with Rwanda. This highlights how the Rwandan government has acquired self-confidence in the RDF's capabilities to enter foreign (in)security paradigms and operate effectively far from home. This expeditionary capability and intent sets Rwanda apart from other Sub-Saharan African states with the possible exception of Apartheid South Africa. Prior to the RDF's unilateral deployments, Kigali's security operations had been confined to its own Great Lakes region. The nature of RDF interventions in the CAR and Mozambique demonstrates another departure from previous foreign policy actions. In both cases, Rwanda intervened to address an ongoing crisis and actively operated to strengthen Bangui and Maputo's security capabilities. In other words, the RDF's interventions have a double short-term task: combat and training. Take the case of Cabo Delgado.

At the turn of the new year, the Mozambican government granted an extension of the SADC mission and further strengthened bilateral cooperation with Rwanda. Maputo's apprehension is that ASWJ, which is currently on the defensive, will threaten the hydrocarbon industry again if foreign forces withdraw. Accordingly, Mozambique's Minister of Defense, Christovao Chume, provided a boost to his country's partnership with Rwanda by defining the terms of future cooperation within the defense and security sector. This entails not only having the RDF operate as a security force in Mozambique's Afungi area – where most foreign gas extraction facilities and offices are located – but it will also train divisions of the FADM.

EUTM trains eleven Mozambican units, five belonging to the Navy Corps and six to the Army Special Forces, with the final target of constituting the future Quick Reaction Force.<sup>55</sup> In contrast, Kigali's commitment is to promote and assist Maputo in implementing a comprehensive reform of its security apparatus, also incorporating the corps trained by the European mission. In this respect, France has

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55. See EUTM official website, available at: <https://eeas.europa.eu>.

promoted the idea of the EU funding the RDF's operations in Cabo Delgado.<sup>56</sup> Should European states cough up funds for such a venture, the RDF could, in effect, become a proxy force that prosecutes complementary Rwandan and European strategic interests in Mozambique and beyond.<sup>57</sup>

As in Mozambique, a similar pattern has arisen in the CAR regarding the training of local troops<sup>58</sup>. During a meeting between CAR military officers, led by Major General Zephlin Mamadou, and the RDF Chief of Defence Staff, General Jean-Bosco Kazura, the two countries signed an implementation protocol in areas of operations and training.<sup>59</sup> The EU's decision to suspend the EUTM in the CAR – ongoing since 2016 – was due to concerns that the trained divisions would fall under the control of the Wagner Group.<sup>60</sup> Among the options discussed by some European countries,<sup>61</sup> would be to contract out the monitoring of trained troops, if not the whole training process, to the RDF.<sup>62</sup> With the EU's support, the RDF would have been proposed to the CAR authorities as a substitute to the Wagner Group for the training and mentoring of the CAR's military and security services. However, this option is reportedly no longer on the table.

In both the CAR and Mozambique, Rwanda is emerging as an increasingly reliable partner for the EU as it could potentially counter insurgent groups, partially mitigate Russian influence, and promote stability in the area. The two interventions also highlight the expeditionary capabilities of the highly trained, professional, and experienced RDF. They have proved adept at adapting to highly diverse contexts. They have also shown a remarkable ability to coordinate with local actors quickly and effectively. The coordination capacities shown by the RDF on the ground involve security components and civilians. Following the principle of *umuganda* (community work),<sup>63</sup> first pioneered in the CAR and Sudan, Rwandan personnel works with inhabitants of the areas under their supervision to create a livable environment.<sup>64</sup> In practice, RDF promotes

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56. "EU Set to Finance Deployment of Rwandan Army in Cabo Delgado", Africa Intelligence, November 8, 2021.

57. N. Ishimwe, "L'armée rwandaise est-elle en train de devenir le Wagner de la France et de l'Europe ?", *Jambonews*, February 14, 2022.

58. The two countries have signed an agreement to train CAR troops, whose implementation is expected in the coming months.

59. E. Ashimwe, "Rwanda, CAR Military Officials Mull Ways of Strengthening Operations, Training Areas", *The New Times*, May 9, 2021, available at: [www.newtimes.co.rw](http://www.newtimes.co.rw).

60. J. P. Stroobants, "En Centrafrique, un bataillon formé par l'UE serait sous la coupe de Wagner", *Le Monde*, November 30, 2021, available at: [www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr).

61. Interview with European diplomats, Zoom, October 25, 2021.

62. "EU Plans to Place Troops Trained by Its Military Mission in CAR under Rwanda's Supervision", Africa Intelligence, January 3, 2022.

63. See [www.mod.gov.rw](http://www.mod.gov.rw).

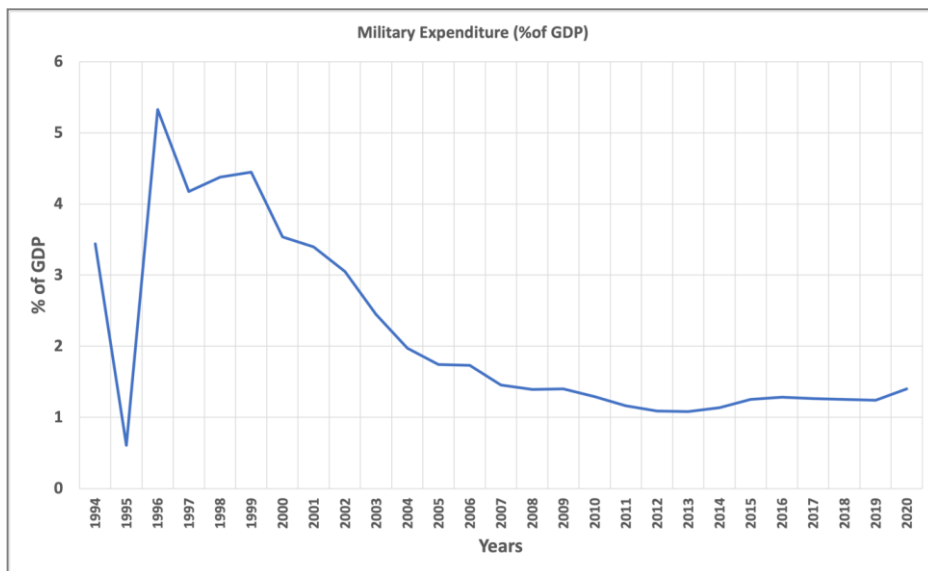
64. "Rwandan Peacekeepers Conduct Community Work in Juba", *Sudan Tribune*, October 2, 2019, available at: <https://sudantribune.com>.

projects aimed at improving the living conditions of local communities, such as rebuilding infrastructure.

**Figure 4 : Rwanda's Military Personnel (1994-2014)<sup>65</sup>**



**Figure 5: Rwanda's Military Expenditure (% of GDP), 1994-2020**



Source: World Bank Data.

65. Rwanda's personnel: Active 33,000 (Army 32,000 Air 1,000), Paramilitary 2,000. Source: "The Military Balance 2020", The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), p. 495.

# The Rwanda's Motives behind Its Military Diplomacy

Rwanda is becoming a reliable partner in the African context as demonstrated by its military interventions in Mozambique and CAR. Rwanda can capitalize on these developments in two primary ways: material gains and political influence.

There are two fundamental motivations behind Kagame's attempt to build greater economic interdependence with African countries. On the one hand, Rwanda needs to overcome some significant structural weaknesses. On the other hand, the economic dimension is part of a preventive strategy. Rwanda is small, landlocked, and heavily populated. It is also almost entirely devoid of natural resources.<sup>66</sup> The last two decades' economic growth and development rates have, as noted, been fueled almost exclusively by foreign investment and aid.<sup>67</sup> This dependency constitutes a severe restraint on the country's political ambitions and a weakness to which Rwandan political elites seek a solution. From Kagame and the RPF's perspective, the way to overcome its structural weaknesses – lack of natural resources and economic dependence – is through greater cooperation with other African states.<sup>68</sup> This is, in turn, influenced by Kigali's conception of African security. This echoes the ideas of Frédéric Bastiat, who noted: "If goods do not cross borders, the army will."<sup>69</sup> Rwandan elites are, in fact, convinced that development is an antidote to the outbreak of future conflicts. The improvement of development rates and the average living standard is a determinant for regional political stability and insurance for many African regimes.<sup>70</sup> The most tangible example is the Rwandan path itself.

The Rwandan government links security and economic partnerships and it exploits the profile built up over the years by Kagame himself. In the case of the CAR, some cooperation agreements have occurred prior to the

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66. L. Kuo, "Rwanda Is a Landlocked Country with Few Natural Resources: So Why Is China Investing so Heavily in It?", *Quartz Africa*, November 22, 2016, available at: <https://qz.com>.

67. "Economic Studies – Rwanda", Coface, February 2022, available at: [www.coface.com](http://www.coface.com).

68. President Kagame is a supporter of continental economic integration. See, P. Kagame, "The Imperative to Strengthen Our Union. Report on the Proposed Recommendations for the Institutional Reform of the African Union", January 29, 2017, available at: [www.tralac.org](http://www.tralac.org).

69. The quote is often attributed to the XIX<sup>e</sup> century French Liberal economist Claude Frédéric Bastiat. Available at: <https://oll.libertyfund.org>.

70. N. Jensen and L. Wantchekon, "Resource Wealth and Political Regimes in Africa", *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 7, 2004, pp. 816-841.



deployment of RDF troops.<sup>71</sup> However, the military intervention by the RDF has had the effect of enhancing ties and has led to new cooperation agreements in four sectors: economic development plans, reform of the CAR's security sector, mining, and transport. Likewise, the strengthening of cooperation has involved the Rwandan private sector. On the sidelines of the official bilateral meetings, for instance, there have been numerous talks with several Rwandan entrepreneurs. Last spring, several Rwandan Private Sector Federation (PSF) members established a company in the CAR to begin exploring opportunities. The conditions offered by the CAR to Rwandan investors are particularly attractive. Bangui has guaranteed various incentives, including tax vacations for up to ten years, for entrepreneurs who will set up activities in rural areas of the country.

In the case of Mozambique, security cooperation agreements were the prelude to establishing economic partnerships. Through their respective institutions in charge of development, the Rwanda Development Board (RDB) and Mozambique's Investment and Export Promotion Agency (APIEX), the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).<sup>72</sup> The Rwandan regime paved the way for increased private sector activities in Mozambique. Besides the interest in the energy sector, the areas on which Rwandan investment is most focused concern the agricultural sector and infrastructure.

The second way Rwanda has chosen to promote its security and economic integration strategy lies in the image of the country and its leader. Rwanda has gained the reputation of being a stable and responsible country, one that is able to provide support to other African states facing periods of internal crisis. Besides the country's profile, regard for Kagame as a capable, no-nonsense leader with the best interests of his country in mind has grown. Kagame is often considered both by African leaders and the African public as the continent's best leader. While there is still a degree of criticism at the international level directed at Kagame's authoritarianism, on the continent, he is considered the key to Rwanda's success and stability.

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71. J. M. Loukoula, "Coopération : la Centrafrique conclut cinq accords avec le Rwanda", ADIAC, October 16, 2019, available at: [www.adiac-congo.com](http://www.adiac-congo.com).

72. "Rwanda and Mozambique Sign MOU to Strengthen Economic Ties", Trendsnafrica, October 9, 2021, available at: <https://trendsnafrica.com>.

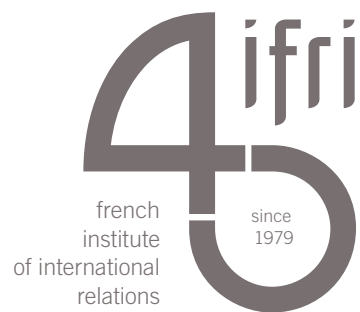
# Conclusion

Rwanda's military diplomacy promotes an alternative idea of African security. The Rwandan regime showed its willingness to operate no longer or not only in coordination with other forces but also independently, based upon bilateral agreements. The Mozambique case highlighted the differing levels of effectiveness between multilateral and unilateral response capabilities. The deployment of the SADC-sponsored mission was slowed down by the need to find consensus among the members first, and by cumbersome bureaucratic and institutional mechanisms later. Conversely, the deployment of RDF troops was quick, effective, and based on elite-to-elite consensus and complementary interests. Although the effect of RDF troops' deployments in the CAR and Mozambique should not be exaggerated, it is also worth acknowledging the potential of the Rwandan approach to African security issues. On the ground, Rwandan forces have achieved good results in countering both ASWJ and some of the armed groups operating in the CAR due to their experience, professionalism and their knowledge of asymmetric warfare techniques. The RDF's effectiveness in Cabo Delgado against a violent Islamist terrorist group, in particular, has strengthened the country's image as an African state committed not only to fighting terrorism, but capable of doing so effectively and unilaterally. This latter aspect makes Rwanda particularly attractive to international stakeholders, particularly in the West. The possible appointment by UN Secretary-General António Guterres of a Rwandan diplomat at the head of MINUSCA,<sup>73</sup> may further prove how Kigali has gained influence and recognition within international circles. As such, the Rwandan army appears well suited to act as a proxy force for international interests in Sub-Saharan Africa, assuming those interests dovetail with those of Kagame and the RPF.

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73. "Nations unies : qui sera la nouvelle patronne de la Minusca ?", Africa Intelligence, February 18, 2022.





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