

# Early Exit Implications on Bilateral Relations Between Troop-Contributing Country and Host Nation: A Case of Kenya Military Contingents in Democratic Republic of Congo

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## ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the KENCON troops' exit and its implication on bilateral relations between Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The study was primarily qualitative with the main data collection tools being an interview guide and a document analysis guide. This data was thematically analyzed. The findings identified effects such as; strengthened economic ties, improved relations; the exit served as an indicator of a lack of interference in the DRC matter; enhanced political and diplomatic relations; future regional and international partnerships, and finally; public perception and domestic politics. Finally, the study concluded while the implications of the KENCON troops' exit are both positive and negative, the positive ones outweigh the negative ones in number and it will generally depend on how Kenya handles the implications if and when they occur. The study also recommended that similar studies be carried out with a view of including larger samples of respondents from the affected areas where the KENCON troops were carrying out their operations.

**Keywords:-** bilateral relations, early exit, early exit implications, KENCON troops

## INTRODUCTION

Peace Support Operations remain a major resource for containing armed conflict whenever it erupts (Anne, 2005). In most cases, peace support operations last until the completion of the cycle. However, some peace operations may be aborted due to abrupt termination of mandate or withdrawal of troops leading to early exit of troops. Early exit in peace support operations has diplomatic implications for both the host nation and the troop-contributing state (Kamais, 2019).

Cases of early exit are replete in the history of peace support operations (Kamais, 2019). In the early 1990s, the US deployed its troops to Somalia due to the civil war that had ensued following the overthrow of Mohamed Siad Barre's government which was characterized by dictatorship (Peter, 2006). Despite having put in place some humanitarian operations, the situation remained extremely difficult due to ongoing fighting, hijacking, and looting of food convoys by Somali militias (Menkhaus, 2010). The US later withdrew its troops and this brought about a whole state of anxiety with many feeling that this would create an opportunity for the resurgence of the militia. In a way, this did not go well with the two countries; the US and Somalia in terms of bilateral relations as Somalia felt that the US did not support them fully (Delaney, 2017). Accordingly, the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Somalia affected the bilateral relations between the two countries in various ways; first, it indicated some form of change in U.S. policy away from direct involvement in Somalia; second, the withdrawal compromised the bilateral relations between the two countries given the instability that characterized Somalia at the time and third; it was perceived as an indication of failure of humanitarian intervention since the number of casualties was rather high (CMH, 2014).

In the 2000s, the United States had also deployed its troops in Afghanistan following the bombing of the American World Trade Centre by terrorist groups that later confirmed that they surely did it (Kirstein & Chris, 2009). These terrorists were traced back to Afghanistan and Iraq. The US deployed its troops to these areas with a view of flushing out these terrorists. Mann (2004) states that, to a large extent, this operation pacified Iraq even though it also led to some destruction. But again, the US had to bow down to some diplomatic pressure that wanted its troops out of Iraq and when this happened, the Iraqi people felt that America had left them in a delicate state. This negatively affected the bilateral relations between Iraq and the US.

Though less pronounced, the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan had some effects on the bilateral relations between the two countries in some ways. For instance, it saw the conclusion of the strategic partnership agreement that was aimed at improving both their bilateral relations and the lives of the Afghans. Further, after the Taliban took over the leadership in 2021, the U.S. government has since changed its approach to pragmatic engagement while at the same time focusing on humanitarian aid (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

In the African continent, a similar trend of early troop exits from peace support operations has also been observed. In Somalia, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), a peacekeeping force, has declared its intention to withdraw and subsequently be replaced by a smaller new force. While a smaller force is a preference due to a reduction in the heavy presence of foreign troops in Somalia, it has also been argued that this is a sure way of building domestic security capacities. Such intentions were also evident in 2021. This has, however, threatened the neighboring countries who see the possibility of a security vacuum and a resurgent al-Shabab armed group of fighters seizing power. This decision appears to be founded on the concerns of the top funders of the AU force in Somalia; over the long-term financing and sustainability. At the same time, it is feared that such a prolonged political dispute could also lead Ethiopia to withdraw its troops (Liaga & Habib, 2024).

In the Kenyan context, for many years Kenya has deployed its defense troops in various peacekeeping and enforcement missions in Africa and elsewhere. Earlier on, Kenya also had some troops deployed in South Sudan as part of a United Nations peacekeeping mission commonly referred to as the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (Glassmyre & Simbanis, 2008). These troops were later withdrawn even though the peace-keeping mission was not yet complete. Kenya withdrew all its forces after the UN Secretary-General dismissed the Kenyan commander of the peacekeeping forces, blaming him for failing to protect civilians during violence in Juba, a decision that was strongly contested by Kenya. However, unlike the other foregoing cases of withdrawal, the withdrawal of Kenyan troops from South Sudan did not compromise their bilateral relations. This was due to several reasons. These reasons comprised pre-independent Kenya had welcomed many refugees from Sudan and Kenya played a very big role in the peace process leading to the birth of South Sudan as a nation in 2011. Further, Kenya has collaborated with Sudan in areas of culture, and trade and has some infrastructural links such as Kitale-Juba which is under rehabilitation, and the planned Lamu Port South – Sudan Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) program, which intends to interconnect East African nations, including South Sudan.

Moreover, Kenya and South Sudan in collaboration with the East African Community (EAC) deployed a regional force to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2023 but both exited later in the year (Center on International Cooperation, 2008). DRC had faced numerous security threats that warranted peacekeeping efforts and diplomatic interventions to ensure stability in the region (McCreedy, 2022). Some of the key security threats included armed conflict often fueled by ethnic tensions, competition over natural resources, and the presence of numerous armed groups and militia groups, such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), Mai-Mai militias, and others. DRC's vast mineral wealth, including gold, diamonds, coltan, and other minerals, has also been a driver of conflict as armed groups and even state actors vie for control over resource-rich areas. In addition, ethnic tensions and rivalries have also fueled violence in various regions of the DRC, leading to communal conflicts and displacement of communities whereas DRC's weak governance structures, corruption, and lack of effective state institutions have contributed to insecurity and hindered efforts to maintain peace (ISS, 2022). Consequently, in November 2022, the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) deployed troops in the war-torn area of the DRC. Among the troops was an approximately 900-man battalion from Kenya (Defis Humanitaires, 2023).

The Kenyan troops were tasked with supporting the Congolese military, in a bid to bring peace to the mineral-rich country which was being fought over by numerous different armed groups (Center for Preventive Action,

2024). The Kenyan troops were also tasked with working alongside other troops from Uganda, South Sudan, and Burundi in targeting armed groups. In particular, Kenyan forces were tasked with focusing on rebels in the North Kivu area. Initially, Kenya had been instrumental in trying to broker a permanent peace deal between DR Congo and the rebels. This followed the resolution of an earlier dispute between Kenya and DRC over the presence of the troops in eastern DRC under the EACRF. However, on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2023, the first assemblage of the Kenya Contingent (KENCON) began exiting DRC in keeping with the 23<sup>rd</sup> EAC Heads of State Ordinary Summit which avowed that the EACRF mandate would not be renewed past 8 December 2023 (East African Community, 2023). In line with this exit, this study aimed to examine early exit implications on bilateral relations between the troop-contributing country and the host nation, focusing on KENCONs in Congo.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Civil War in the Democratic Republic of Congo has spanned decades. Several military interventions and peace support operations have been sanctioned to contain the situation, with the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) being launched in 1998 when the country was experiencing heightened tension. However, the deployment of military troops in the DRC by the Kenyan government in November 2022 as part of EACRF, elicited mixed diplomatic feelings amongst the involved states. For instance, collaborative media reports indicated that some of these groups were perceived as serving proxies for DRC's neighboring countries. This painted those neighboring countries with troops in the DRC, including Kenya, in ways that may negatively affect their diplomatic relations with the DRC. For its part, Kenya defended the deployment of her troops to the DRC citing the need to protect her 'strategic interests' (thus, expanding trade between the two states) and the need to safeguard her investments in DRC. Nonetheless, in early 2024, Kenya withdrew its forces (KENCON), which left the DRC feeling like Kenya abandoned its mission midstream and that this may leave the DRC still vulnerable and unprepared to take up the responsibility immediately and effectively. This may have some implications for the bilateral relations between Kenya and the DRC for this exit continues to generate some tension between Kenya and the DRC and threatens to strain their bilateral relations which this study was keen on establishing.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND QUESTION

This study aimed to realize the objective:-

To assess the implication of the KENCON troops' exit on the bilateral relations between Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Additionally, the study aimed to answer the question:-

What is the implication of the KENCON troops' exit on the bilateral relations between Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Review

Several theories can help explain the implication of troops' exit on bilateral relations. This study was especially underpinned by the theories of liberal institutionalism and constructivism. The liberal institutionalism theory concentrates on the function of international organizations and institutions in nurturing cooperation between states. The theory also contends that peacekeeping operations can help ensure that states comply with international agreements and laws, devise channels for dialogue, and set up norms of cooperation. Therefore, the theory could be employed in the study to show that Kenya's engagement in the DRC peacekeeping can improve cooperation and bilateral relations between the two countries, and as such, Kenyan troops' early exit from the DRC may impact these relations.

On the other hand, constructivism stresses the role of norms, identities, and ideas in molding state behavior. The theory proposes that the manner states perceive each other, on the grounds of shared values and beliefs, can

influence their interactions. Besides, this theory applies to peacekeeping by implying that peacekeeping operations can impact the manner states regard each other by altering the account around conflict. From this perspective, peacekeeping operations may help alter the view of an initially combative state into a partner in peace. In the proposed study's context, this theory can be employed to demonstrate that the norms surrounding Kenyan troops' exit from the DRC may influence bilateral relations by establishing a peaceful coexistence between the DRC and Kenya.

## Empirical Review

Examining existing literature indicates multiple cases of early troop exits from peacekeeping missions, both within Africa and globally. International examples include the Philippines' early troop withdrawal from Iraq in 2004 after Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, the Philippine president, yielded to the ultimatums of a militant group that was holding a Filipino truck driver hostage (McCarthy, 2004). Recently, the U.S. also withdrew its troops as well as most of its embassy staff from Afghanistan in 2021 following the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan and the Afghan president fleeing the nation (Kiely & Farley, 2021). This withdrawal then resulted in Germany and the United Kingdom being unhappy with this early exit decision and made their unease public. In addition, NATO allies contended that the US troops' early exit presented the Taliban with the inducement to negotiate a power-sharing deal with the Afghan government as well as led to the demoralizing of the Afghan army giving them little motive to fight (Shea, 2021). Lastly, generally, the early exit of the NATO troops was also linked to a public relations disaster and drove perceptions within the general public and among NATO soldiers who had served in Afghanistan that all their sacrifices, including the wounding of tens of thousands and over 4000 deaths, were for nothing (Shea, 2021).

In Africa, one of the most recent troops exits entails the departing of French forces from Chad on January 11, 2025. This early exit followed the Chadian government denouncing the Military cooperation agreements first signed in 1978 with France and revised in 2019 (Oxford Analytica, 2025). Besides, the French military units had also initially withdrawn from Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, which signaled a substantial deterioration in French power's influence on the African continent. This statement is further backed by the fact that the French troops are required to withdraw from Senegal and Ivory Coast (Sankare, 2025).

In the Kenyan context, the DRC case provides one of the most recent Kenyan early troops exit incidents. The decision to deploy Kenya's troops to DRC for the peace mission working with the East African Community Regional Force in the Democratic Republic of Congo had to be approved by the National Assembly (The Weekly Review in Sunday Nation, 2022). And even though there was a general feeling that this was such an expensive decision, for a country that had in the recent past embraced austerity measures due to limited fiscal space, it was argued, by the national assembly in their bid to explain their support for the deployment that the cost of not deploying these troops was equally high. In the past, KENCON has been deployed to places such as Somalia for the same Peacekeeping mission. Studies on this intervention such as Migue (2014) led to the positive conclusion that a regional and multilateral practice of military diplomacy is a plausible approach to the mitigation of security threats to a country's national interests. This was therefore going to strengthen the relations between the two countries.

It was also felt that the deployment of the KENCON to the Regional Force was aligned strategically to Kenya's national interests as this was going to enhance the country's ability to respond to threats emanating from the Great Lakes Conflict System as well as helping to mitigate threats to Kenya's stability and thereby enhancing the security of its citizens. Despite the clear thinking behind the decision to deploy the Kenyan troops to DRC, some cautions have been floated by critics and observers. For instance, there is a sense of distrust of the new force among Congolese, many of whom deeply resent what they see as a long history of foreign meddling in the resource-rich East (Nelleke van de Walle, 2022). This has been manifested in the protests that were staged by civilians in Kinshasa to protest the regional force's deployment. However, political analysts have maintained that the multilateral force structure in itself and which includes the DRC itself may help to reduce perceptions among Congolese that outsiders are intervening in the country to secure particular foreign interests (Nelleke van de Walle, 2022).

But on their part, Kenyans have repeatedly emphasized that they would prefer to avoid fighting if they can, and



that diplomatic pressure on Rwanda could bring about a ceasefire. If this happens, then it means that their deployment would be limited to Goma (International Crisis Group, 2022). This view is made in the context of the fact that Kenya has good relations with all countries in the region, including Rwanda, and that it has no record of supporting armed groups in the eastern DRC, and due to this, it has always curved the image of a neutral arbiter. To deploy KENCON troops to DRC would appear to run counter to these apparent good relations. This makes it necessary to analyze the possible implications of the diplomatic relations between Kenya and the DRC following this deployment of KENCON, a task which this study is designed to undertake.

## METHODOLOGY

The study comprised qualitative research. The study targeted the staff from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kenya, the Embassy of DRC in Nairobi, political analysts and academicians in the area of International Relations mainly based at the academic institutions of higher learning, and Kenyans living in the DRC. The researcher used purposive sampling to choose five employees of the DRC embassy in Kenya and five staff from Kenya's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Random sampling, on the other hand, helped in selecting a sample population of three political analysts, five academicians from any of the academic institutions of higher learning in the country, and five Kenyans living in DRC. Thus, the study's sample population was 23 respondents.

The data for this study was obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Interviews were held with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, Embassy staff, political analysts, academicians, and Kenyans living in DRC using an interview guide to provide primary data. The secondary data included the information extracted from existing written sources including published research papers, newspapers, and other collaborative media reports using a document analysis guide. Using secondary data also enabled an extraction of voices from DRCs to capture their insights on the implications of the early exit of Kenyan troops. The obtained data was analyzed thematically and presented in narrative form.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study's objective was to examine how the exit of the Kenyan troops from the Democratic Republic of Congo is likely to affect the bilateral relations between Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo. This question was posed to the respondents who participated in this study. At the onset, it should be remembered that the exit of the KENCON Troops was not just Kenya's decision but an act of effecting a decision taken by the EAC heads of state. It is also important to remember that the DRC is also a member of the East African Community and therefore, this is a decision they partly participated in making.

This section presents the findings on the issue of how this exit from the DRC may affect bilateral relations between Kenya and the DRC. One feature that stands out from these findings is that this exit could have both positive and negative effects on the bilateral relations between Kenya and the DRC.

### Positive effects of the exit of Kenyan Defense Forces from the DRC

In discussing these effects, it is important to remember that these are effects that are likely to occur because the exit just happened early this year. They are therefore potential effects. Accordingly, the positive effects that were filtered out of the responses from the respondents include the following:

#### Strengthened economic ties and bilateral relations

Already, there is active bilateral trade between Kenya and the DR Congo. Kenya exports some Agricultural products to the DRC and has some service industries such as banks in the DRC. At the same time, Kenya has signed crucial agreements on transport, security, and trade with the DRC. These agreements aim to improve business between the two countries including handling cargo from the port of Mombasa. Again, Kenyan banks, including KCB Group and Equity Bank, invested in the DRC, making it a lucrative market for Kenyan banks.

Complementarily, in this study, of the respondents that participated in the study, 80% indicated that since the KENCON troops had managed to suppress and secure the areas formerly under the control of armed militia in

Eastern Congo, even if the KENCON exists, there would continue to be good bilateral relations between the two countries. The minority who felt that the exit was likely to compromise the bilateral relations between the two countries thought so because the troops withdrew ‘prematurely’, probably, leaving the situation not fully addressed. This view, however, fails to recognize the fact that the KENCON did not just exit on their own volition but rather, they were following the decision made by their respective Heads of State (East African Heads of State) and that the DRC head of state is a member. Thus, generally, available literature coupled with the views of the majority of the respondents point to the fact that the exit was not contentious and as such, this could expand the possibilities for further economic cooperation between Kenya and the DRC. In this regard, Kenya could leverage this success in peacekeeping in DRC to secure preferential access to more markets including mining and transport.

Additionally, contrary to the popular feeling amongst bloggers and newspaper reports that the exit of the KENCON Troops would weaken the bilateral relations between the two countries, more than half of the respondents exuded confidence that this was going to strengthen the relations. Indeed, as one political analyst pointed out:

*“...the DRC has every reason to thank Kenya despite the exit. For this exit to have happened at the time it did was not by KENCON Troops’ choice, but a decision taken at a higher level. For sure, the KENCON secured that part of the country and left. They did not stick around forever. This was an indication that the Kenyan troops did not have selfish interests in DRC but had faith in the locals – the faith that they could continue managing their affairs since there was security (Political Analyst C, Nairobi, October 2024).”*

From the opinion of this political analyst, it is notable that despite the perceptions of there going to be bad diplomatic relations between Kenya and the DRC following the deployment and later the perceived early exit of Kenyan troops, this does not necessarily lead to broken bilateral relations. Rather, the fact that KENCON exited following the directives of EACRF, which by extension, was the demand of the president of the DRC, would indicate respect by KENCON for the interests of the DRC and the locals at large. If KENCON insisted on extending the stay, then this would as have been perceived as a lack of respect for the locals. In this regard, the exit of KENCON from the DRC could therefore lead to improved relations between the two countries, since it may be perceived as an indicator of trust and the confidence that Kenya has in the DRC's ability to maintain security affairs on its own. This is a sign of recognition of DRC's sovereignty on the part of Kenya. This element of trust and respect for DRC's interests is discussed more in the section below.

### **Exit as an indicator of lack of interference in DRC's matter**

Throughout the discourse on the instability of the DRC, there has been this perception that neighboring countries may come to DRC's aid yet with hidden motives of self-interest. Such discourse has tended to flag Burundi and Uganda as DRC's neighbors who, despite outwardly supporting DRC, seem to be pursuing their self-interests. This fear has also been raised in the Kenyan situation. In this regard, the fear has been that the entry of another East African Community into the conflict in DRC may end up interfering with the internal affairs of the DRC. Indeed, as one of the officers at the DRC Embassy in Nairobi observed:

*“Although East African Community countries have contributed their forces to help pacify the Eastern part of DRC, there has been the lingering feeling that these countries are meddling in the internal affairs of the DRC. However, it is a good sign that at the end of their agreed-upon period, they have exited, of course, having brought some reprieve in Eastern Congo (Officer, DRC Embassy, Nairobi, October 2024).”*

The exit of the KENCON as one of the EACRF at the time they were asked to exit, having accomplished their mission in Eastern Congo was a step in the right direction, as it serves to reduce that feeling, amongst the Congolese people, that there is foreign interference in the internal matters of the DRC and this may help improve stability back in the DRC, a condition that favors good bilateral relations.

### **Enhanced Political and Diplomatic Relations**

Contrary to the view that the perceived early exit of the KENCON was early and abrupt, available literature from

the Ministry of Defense blog earlier helped to clarify that this was, first; a planned and well-coordinated exercise and that, even after the exit, SADC forces would take over from EACRF and in this case, KENCON troops, and second; the exit was as a result of the agreement reached at the Summit of EAC Heads of State which includes the president of DRC. In this regard, the exit should not be seen as one that will cause diplomatic tension but rather, one that both nations should celebrate as a success coming out of the joint effort or collaboration in Peacekeeping to achieve regional security. This should strengthen the two countries' diplomatic relations rather than weaken them.

### **Future regional and international partnerships**

Kenya is just one of the countries that came in to support the alleviation of the conflict in DRC. It is just one of the seven East African countries that contributed their troops. Nonetheless, the KENCON provided the leadership of the EACRF. The presence of Kenya in DRC through the KENCON should therefore be seen through the lens of Kenya as just one of the cog wheels in the entire peacekeeping project in DRC Congo. Other parts include the UN as well as the African Union. As one of the respondents pointed out:

*“...why would DRC want to isolate Kenya and judge it in isolation while Kenya was just one of the countries that contributed to the EACRF forces? It should be remembered that even as Kenya was participating in this mission, the decision was not solely Kenyan but an EAC decision. (Political Analyst A, Nairobi, October 2024).”*

From the foregoing views, it is apparent that Kenya's exit from DRC was not sanctioned by the Kenyan government but by the entire EAC leadership. Therefore, since Kenya's exit was an act of obedience to the decision of the summit, this exit is likely to enhance Kenya's standing amongst these other partners. In other words, an exit that is consistent with international agreements will strengthen Kenya's reputation in global peace efforts rather than compromising its relations with the DRC. However, this will only happen if Kenya and the DRC also look at this matter through the same lens. In brief, the bilateral relations between Kenya and DRC and even the other countries involved in this mission will be shaped by how the exit is managed and whether it aligns with broader security, political, and economic goals shared by both nations.

### **Public perception and domestic politics**

An issue of this magnitude where a country's forces go into another country to support peacekeeping is not immune to varying political interpretations. This has happened before in the case of the Kenyan peacekeeping mission in Somalia and even Kenya's diplomatic interventions in the conflict in (South) Sudan (Weekly Review, September 2023). There have been perceptions of success or lack of it in the mission by KENCON Troops. In the earlier sections of this chapter, the study highlighted sentiments about how the president of DRC was not happy with the way EACRF (which includes KENCON Troops) was carrying out its mandate by not using force on the armed militia thereby dismissing the EACRF as not effective. There were also views of the locals who felt that the KENCON had not achieved much since there was not much difference, in their view, between when the KENCON came in and when leaving. They argued that for EACRF “The protection of civilians was not their concern.” They also stated,

*“Schools were targeted and transformed into military assets. Pupils' desks were used as firewood. Our children do not go to school. Some health structures have been attacked or destroyed and others were closed. ...Armed groups looted our homes [and] our property, even in the presence of EAC forces, which neither reacted nor provided solutions (Center for Civilians Conflict, 2019).”*

### **The local media in the DRC also contended:**

*“The message is clear: the EAC regional force must leave the Democratic Republic of Congo by 8 December, as agreed, because it has not been able to resolve the problem, particularly that of the M23 (Wafula & Mungai, 2023).”*

However, it is apparent that while the DRC president and the locals were dismissing the success of the KENCON based on how they were conducting the mission (not using enough force), the KENCON executed the exercise

under the limits set out in their mandate. As such, they did not use as much force as expected since the EACRF under which they were serving was moving from pure use of force to more use of diplomacy. Therefore, depending on how Kenya's efforts are perceived by the DRC, they will determine the bilateral relations between the two countries. In this regard, it is more how these perceptions will be handled and managed that will ultimately determine the nature of bilateral relations between the two countries.

### **Negative effects of the exit of KENCON from the DRC**

Despite the foregoing positive effects of the exit of the KENCON from the DRC in early 2024, there could also be some negative effects associated with this exit. Through the interviews held with the various respondents and the available literature, the study was able to bring forth the following potential negative effects of this exit from the DRC:

#### **Increased or continued instability**

When the Kenyan troops went into the DRC, there were armed militia taking control of the Eastern regions. During their stay, several reports indicated that the militia were suppressed. However, after the exit, there were reports that there was beginning to be observed some resurgence of the militia. What this means is that despite the plan that SADC would take over from the KENCON, the exit appears to have left a power vacuum in certain areas which could later lead to instability and violence. This would then be interpreted by some critics as carelessness on the part of KENCON thereby constraining the bilateral relations between Kenya and the DRC.

#### **Implications on regional security**

The DRC has long been linked with numerous attacks from M23 and other militia groups as well as the Islamic State-affiliated Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). Specifically, the ADF rebels operate closer to the Ugandan border in northeast Beni Territory of North Kivu province. As such, in case Kenyan troops left a security vacuum in their early exit, these rebel groups could occupy this vacuum, strengthen their operations, and eventually attack neighboring countries like Uganda and Rwanda. Besides, the conflict between these militia groups and the Congolese, Rwandan, and Ugandan forces could spill over to other African countries.

On the other hand, if the humanitarian crisis DRC witnessed due to the rise of these militia groups, including the high death rates of DRC residents and the displacement of others were to continue following the exit, then the entire regional community, especially the EACRF and SADC, would be perceived as having failed in stopping such violence. This would further compromise regional security dynamics, especially given that the DRC has long been at loggerheads with Burundi, with the former accusing the latter of supporting the M23 rebels. A similar accusation has also been made by Burundi against Rwanda with the former alleging that Rwanda supported the Red Tabara rebels in DRC's South Kivu (Ilunga, 2024).

Besides, generally, DRC is a major player in the East African region. Therefore, the exit of KENCON from the DRC may have broader implications for the security of the region. Therefore, since this exit has already happened, and not so long ago, it will be important to monitor the situation closely and continuously and carefully assess the long-term effects of this decision.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study demonstrated that while the popular discourse had it that the KENCON Troops exited rather early, there are enough grounds to support the exit that KENCON Troops did at the time it did so. These have to do with the fact that the decision to exit was made at a level higher than KENCON and that ultimately, KENCON Troops had surely achieved its objective of securing the Eastern region from the control of armed militia. In addition, considering the issue of the way the exit would shape the bilateral relations between the two countries, the study concluded that while the implications of the exit are both positive and negative, the positive ones outweigh the negative ones in number, it will generally depend on how Kenya handles the implications if and when they occur.

Additionally, the study could have several policy implications. First, the study recommends exit policies be



established for all peacekeeping missions. While planning for an exit strategy can be problematic for it could distract the contingents from their mission mandate, in case of an early exit, having these policies in place would prove vital in ensuring a successful operations handover to the host state. this approach would then help avert the creation of a power vacuum that rebel groups can exploit which would deteriorate the bilateral relations between the host and contributing states. On the other hand, the study recommends the implementation of policies that promote Kenya being a mediator in the DRC conflict post the troops' withdrawal.

Finally, from the study findings, the study recommends that more inquiry goes into what Kenya is doing at the moment in line with handling all these perceptions with a view of stabilizing her bilateral relations with the DRC. The study also recommends that further studies be carried out to find out how the situation was in DRC after the exit of KENCON Troops particularly after the SADC took over the security of the areas exited by the KENCON Troops. Lastly, this study was carried out in Kenya with the respondents mainly drawn from Kenya. It however was not possible to get a sample of people from the affected areas where the KENCON Troops were operating and listen to their narrative of experiences. It is therefore recommended that similar studies be carried out with a view of including larger samples of respondents from the affected areas where the KENCON Troops were carrying out their operations.

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