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Russia-Ukraine War at Critical Juncture: from Battlefield Stalemate to Diplomatic Parley

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Russia-Ukraine War at Critical Juncture: from Battlefield Stalemate to Diplomatic Parley

Just a week short of the third anniversary of the Russia-Ukraine war focus has shifted from an embattled battlefield to an intense parley of diplomatic deliberation for a peace deal. US President Trump, who took office on January 20, had repeatedly vowed to swiftly end the Ukraine war. On 12 Feb, Trump said both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy expressed a desire for peace in separate phone calls with him on Wednesday, and Trump ordered top U.S. officials to begin talks on ending the war in Ukraine. The conversations came after Trump's defence secretary earlier said Kyiv would have to give up its long-held goals of joining the NATO military alliance and regaining all of its territory seized by Russia, signalling a dramatic shift in Washington's approach to the conflict. Later, President Trump offered reassurances that Ukraine would be involved in negotiations to end the war with Russia.

The Munich Security Conference started days after U.S. President Donald Trump and Putin held watershed talks that shook Ukraine and America's NATO allies. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met Vice President Vance in Germany on January 14, 2025, with a warning against trusting Russia's Vladimir Putin, as concerns mount in Kyiv and among its European allies that the Ukraine war will be settled over their heads. Many European leaders, diplomats and generals in Munich hold grave concerns over the deepening chasm between the transatlantic allies and even for the post-World War II international order itself.

The Trump administration's push for direct negotiations with Russia without Ukraine's involvement leaves the European allies with no clear role. With a flurry of conflicting statements in their first forays into Europe, Trump aides also fueled concerns that the US president will embrace just about any deal with Putin — even if it's a bad one for Ukraine and a continent whose borders are again threatened by Russian expansionism.

European leaders fear that in one-on-one negotiations with President Vladimir V.



Putin of Russia, Trump is on his way to agreeing to terms that could ultimately put Moscow in a position to own a fifth of Ukraine and to prepare to take the rest in a few years. Suggestions that the US will exclude its European friends from peace talks on Ukraine — despite demanding they provide security guarantees and troops as

part of any deal to end the war — also triggered alarm in capitals on the continent, with France calling key leaders to an emergency meeting in Paris on 17 Feb.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio arrived in Saudi Arabia on Monday ahead of expected talks with Russian officials aimed at ending Moscow's nearly three-year war in Ukraine. As per Reuters, Rubio is set to meet Russian

officials in Saudi Arabia alongside Trump's national security adviser Mike Waltz and White House Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff. However, there is no official information about Russian officials involved in the meeting. No Ukrainian delegation will join the US-Russia meeting in Saudi Arabia, reported BBC, citing sources.

The location of the US-Russian interaction has put Saudi Arabia in the spotlight over Ukraine war peace talks. According to a CNN report, Donald Trump has openly advocated for Saudi Arabia to play a key role in negotiations between Russia and Ukraine over the ongoing war. Saudi Arabia has been an essential part of US foreign policy. Saudi Arabia is a key member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Due to its influence in areas like energy and geopolitics, it enjoys strong ties with Russia. In addition, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is a top negotiator and has cordial relations with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. He has participated in multiple prisoner swaps between Russia and Ukraine over the past years.

Notwithstanding diplomatic parley, both sides continued to remain embattled in entrenched battles on the land frontier. During the last two months, Russian forces had made rapid gains in the area in December and January, seizing a string of settlements and threatening to cut off Pokrovsk. Since early this month, the Russians' progress has stalled. On 15 February, Ukrainian forces took back the village of Pischane, southwest of the city of Pokrovsk, as per a Ukrainian military spokesperson. Since early this month, the Russians' progress has stalled. Russian bloggers say Ukrainian drones dominate the skies and have been methodically destroying armoured vehicles. In response The Russian military command reportedly redeployed additional elements of the Southern Military District's (SMD) 8th Combined Arms Army (CAA) to the Toretsk and eastern Pokrovsk directions, further indicating that the Russian military command intends to prioritize putting pressure on Kostyantynivka – the southernmost point of Ukraine's "fortress belt". Also, The Russian military appears to be committing to a multi-year-long effort to seize Ukraine's "fortress belt" in Donetsk Oblast.

M23 Rebels, Rwanda and the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Africa's Great Lakes Region yet again stands at the precipice of descending into full-blown armed conflict fueled by ethnic tensions linked to the 1994 Rwandan genocide and exacerbated by a desire to extract natural resources. On 23 January 2025, Rwanda-backed Mouvement du 23 Mars (M23) forces took control of Goma, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) North Kivu province. The city's capture and the M23's recent advances towards Bukavu in South Kivu mark a drastic escalation of a model of hybrid cross-border warfare that many had hoped was left in the past. DRC has experienced armed conflicts for much of its post-colonial history, beginning with the Congo crisis (1960-1965) which exacerbated complex and intractable ethnic frictions. The First (1996-1997) and the Second Congo War (1998-2003) reinforced these divisions along ethnic lines and got regional countries like Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Angola, Libya, Chad, Sudan and Namibia too involved.

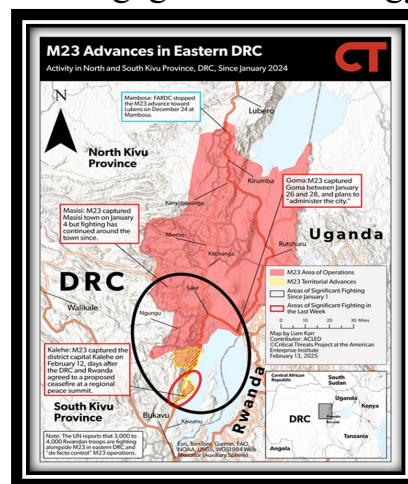
Recurring violence is often described as a mere byproduct of regional instability or casually dismissed as “ethnic conflict”, but such characterisation fails to underscore the role DRC’s much smaller neighbour Rwanda plays in fostering regional (in)security. The Congolese government has repeatedly accused Rwanda of sowing chaos in the region to reap the vast benefits of critical minerals such as cobalt, coltan and gold that are essential for the booming global technology industry. In response, Rwanda has routinely denied it has any direct links with M23 or is directly involved in the ongoing fighting in Goma which has resulted in devastating humanitarian consequences.

The protracted nature of the conflict in DRC has prompted a plethora of peace initiatives to address the persistent instability spanning from the Pretoria agreement in 2002 to the Nairobi Peace Process in 2022. Yet these approaches to peacebuilding have resulted in limited success owing to several factors. Analysts have argued that all these agreements “embodied linearity by assuming that, once signed, the conflicts would deescalate, and peace would reemerge.” However, such an approach fails to take into consideration the cyclical nature of conflicts where shifting alliances and localised grievances often reignite violence.

The peacekeeping missions which are mandated to oversee the implementation of ceasefires have consistently fallen short as evident in the UN Peacekeeping missions suffering from a crisis of legitimacy in recent times owing to their failure to protect civilians from violence. Additionally, the continued involvement of external state actors who use armed groups as proxies “to promote a war economy of illegal exploitation of mineral resources” has further complicated the task of conflict resolution.

The first time when M23 rebels seized control of Congolese cities was in 2012 following which concerted diplomatic pressure from the international community successfully resulted in a change in Rwanda’s calculations in 2013. But since the fall of Goma in January 2025, the international community has thus far failed to apply any sort of pressure on Rwanda to withdraw its forces from DRC. Statements have been made by the UK, France, the US, and China who have threatened to suspend their development assistance to Rwanda, but such threats are yet to materialise. Rwanda’s position as one of the few reliable security partners of the West in Africa, the country’s post-genocide development achievements, President Paul Kagame’s global reputation and the fact that Rwanda is one of the largest contributors to peacekeeping forces have carried the nation loads of favour. This is reflected in data from the World Bank which points out that Rwanda has been one of the largest beneficiaries of Western development assistance, particularly from the United States, over the last couple of decades.

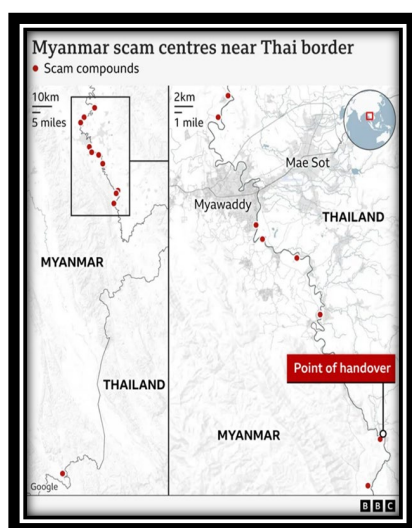
It remains doubtful if the M23 armed rebels could have seized control of Goma or made advances into Bukavu without Rwandan support, although the Rwandan side



denies such allegations. President Kagame has referenced the arbitrariness of colonial borders as the root cause of the present conflict. Although M23's original agenda was connected to the demands for the return of Congolese Tutsi refugees from mainly Rwanda to eastern DRC, its agenda has now evolved to signal a desire to provide an alternative to the Congolese state in the areas it controls.

Leaders of the East African Community (EAC) and the South African Development Community (SADC) came up with a joint communiqué on 8 February 2025 which called for immediate ceasefire and the Luanda and Nairobi process – the twin negotiating tracks – to be unified and strengthened. Unfortunately, the summit communiqué did not address the question of Rwanda's troops withdrawal. Instead, it proposed technical measures like a peace roadmap and coordination mechanism without addressing the core political dispute driving the conflict in DRC.

The Dark Web of Cyber Scams: Criminal Syndicates, Militias, and Global Victims



On 13 February, the Thai army announced that it was coordinating an effort to repatriate around 260 people believed to have been victims of human trafficking, after their rescue from scam centres in Myanmar. The repatriation of these victims of human trafficking and forced labour in cyber-fraud networks operating in eastern Myanmar sheds light on the growing entanglement between criminal syndicates, armed militias, and Myanmar's ongoing civil war.

Over the past few years, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos have emerged as major hubs for cybercrime, where criminal syndicates exploit weak governance, porous borders, and systemic corruption to sustain large-scale online scam operations.

Scams such as fraudulent investments, romance scams, illegal gambling, and extortion rackets have generated an estimated tens of billions of dollars annually, according to the United Nations. Victims, often lured by false promises of legitimate job opportunities, are trafficked into scam compounds. There, they face forced labour, physical abuse, and severe restrictions on their movement, with their passports and access to communication confiscated.

One of the most notorious epicentres for these criminal activities is Myanmar's Myawaddy district, located on the Thai border, which has become a stronghold for cyber-fraud operations, particularly under the control of armed groups like the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF) as per media reports.

Many of those repatriated in recent Thai operations were trafficked through Thailand before ending up in scam compounds inside Myanmar, highlighting the

country's role as both a transit and destination point for human trafficking. The global scale of these operations is reflected in the nationalities of the repatriated victims, who hail from over 20 countries—including Ethiopia, Kenya, the Philippines, Malaysia, Pakistan, and China—demonstrating the vast reach of these illicit networks and the transnational nature of the crisis.

Thailand has intensified its countermeasures against scams through direct crackdowns, diplomatic pressure, and cross-border cooperation. Authorities have disrupted utilities to scam centres in Myawaddy, Payathonzu, and Tachileik by cutting off electricity, internet, and fuel. However, these efforts have seen limited success as operations quickly adapt to solar panels and generators. Additionally, arrest warrants have been issued for key figures in the Karen BGF, accused of colluding with criminal syndicates for human trafficking and cyber-fraud. Investigations into potential ties between high-ranking Thai officers and these networks have raised concerns about official complicity in the scams.

Thailand faces growing international pressure, especially from China, to combat cyber-fraud networks. The 2024 abduction and rescue of Chinese actor Wang Xing intensified diplomatic scrutiny, prompting China to urge stronger action against scams targeting its citizens. While China has been proactive in pushing Southeast Asian governments to respond, regional cooperation remains inconsistent due to varying capacities and political will among countries.

Despite Thailand's recent efforts, multiple challenges continue to obstruct a comprehensive crackdown on these scam networks. One of the most significant barriers is the deep-rooted nexus between armed militias and criminal enterprises.

The Karen BGF, while pledging to deport 8,000 scam workers—most of them Chinese nationals—has denied direct involvement in scam operations despite overwhelming evidence of financial ties to these criminal activities. The ongoing civil war following the 2021 military coup has only deepened these challenges, as the collapse of central authority in large swathes of the country has created a power vacuum that criminal groups have eagerly exploited. Many ethnic armed groups rely on the revenue generated from scam operations to fund their insurgencies, making it increasingly difficult to dismantle these illicit enterprises without addressing the broader conflict dynamics in Myanmar. Additionally, scam networks have proven to be highly adaptable and resilient. After a major crackdown in the Kokang region of northern Shan State in 2023, many operations simply shifted to the Thai-Myanmar border, demonstrating their ability to relocate in response to enforcement actions.

The Mekong region—comprising Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia—has become a breeding ground for cyber fraud due to entrenched corruption, ineffective legal frameworks, and weak cross-border law enforcement mechanisms. The scale of forced labour in scam operations is staggering, with a 2024 report by the United States Institute of Peace estimating that over 300,000 individuals remain trapped in such networks across Southeast Asia. These operations not only cause immense human suffering but also pose significant threats to financial security, international law enforcement, and regional stability.