Understanding Armed Group Proliferation in the Eastern Congo

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Key points

- Due to the proliferation of smaller armed groups and the disappearance and scattering of larger rebel movements, the armed group landscape of the eastern Congo has become increasingly fragmented.

- This fragmentation results from the interplay between the growing engagement of lower-level political actors in militarized politics, the volatility of local conflict dynamics, and counterproductive military policies, including military operations.

- Since the end of the wholesale integration of rebel groups into the Congolese national army, military operations have become the preferred strategy to address armed groups.

- These military operations are not part of wider political processes aimed at convincing armed groups to lay down arms.

- There is a need to devise policies that focus primarily on armed groups themselves and their political-economic support networks, which should be complemented by army reform and measures addressing conflict dynamics.

An FARDC soldier deployed in Kibumba, September 2012.

Introduction

After the military defeat of the *Mouvement du 23 mars* (M23, March 23 Movement) rebellion in November 2013, armed mobilization in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has continued at a frightening pace. An initial, much-advertized wave of surrenders did not persist, and consisted mostly of individual combatants rather than armed groups as a whole. During the course of 2014, the armed group landscape underwent further fragmentation, as existing groups split

and new ones emerged. A recent count identifies more than seventy groups in the Kivu provinces alone.[1] Most of these groups—such as the various Raia Mutomboki and Nyatura factions—are not larger-scale rebel movements. They have a limited, although variable, number of fighters, often less than 300. What explains this proliferation of smaller-scale armed groups in the eastern Congo? What policies have been adopted to address this situation? And finally, what are the implications for efforts towards stabilization and peacebuilding?

This briefing identifies the main processes underlying the proliferation of armed groups in the eastern Congo. It argues that, paradoxically, the very policies adopted to tackle armed groups have become a source of their proliferation. This includes military operations, which have recently emerged as the main strategy of stabilization. Therefore, there is a need to develop alternative policies that not only aim to convince armed groups to lay down their arms, but also address their wider political and economic support networks.

Explaining armed group proliferation

The recent emergence of a multitude of smaller armed groups can be explained by the interplay

between three processes.[2] First, the growing involvement of lower-level political actors in armed mobilization, amounting to the 'democratization' of militarized politics; second, the continuing volatility of local conflict dynamics; and third, counterproductive military policies.

The 'democratization' of militarized politics

In the first decade after the Second Congo War (1998–2003), the decisive impetus for renewed armed mobilization was primarily given by national and provincial elites, sometimes connected to regional actors.[3] Discontent with post-settlement developments—often related to diminishing power, status and income—led numerous military leaders and allied politicians and businesspersons either to refuse to lay down their arms or to establish new armed groups. At the same time, claiming to represent the communities from which they originated, these politico-military entrepreneurs voiced unaddressed grievances, such as ongoing insecurity and conflicts around territory, identity, local authority and resources. Due to the linkages between inter-elite competition on the one hand, and conflicts between and within communities on the other, the armed mobilization of one group often stimulated the mobilization of others, which feared finding itself at a comparative disadvantage. The logic here is comparable to that of the security dilemma, whereby groups and elites reinforce their military position when they feel threatened or overtaken by others.

Liaising with armed groups yields numerous advantages for political actors. First, it reinforces their power within their local constituencies. Not only does it enhance their influence over local authorities, it also provides an edge in conflicts and in electoral and economic competition. Furthermore, maintaining contacts to armed groups allows political actors to increase their popular support, especially where armed groups are seen to safeguard communities' interests and security. An enhanced local power position may in turn translate into increased access to provincial and national power circles. By having leverage over armed groups and being able to mobilize local followers, politicians and businesspersons become people to reckon with. Therefore, those in power are pushed to co-opt these groups in order to avoid

their causing insecurity and acting against their interests.

In recent years, however, the usefulness of liaising with armed groups seems to have gradually diminished—at least within the national political arena. It is no longer a shortcut to high-level positions in the politico-administrative apparatus or security services. Nevertheless, at the provincial and local level, manipulating armed groups continues to yield results. Therefore, an ever-wider array of political actors adopts this strategy, a process that may be described as the 'democratization' of militarized politics. Increasingly, armed group activity is nourished by powerful customary chiefs, other local authorities, provincial ministers and parliamentarians, so called *candidats malheureux* (electoral candidates who fail to obtain sufficient votes), medium-size businesspersons, and mid-level commanders.

The 'democratization' of militarized politics points to the relative weakness of the political centre—Kinshasa is unable to control the myriad competing power networks straddling the country. At the same time, it has limited incentives to do so, as political fragmentation pre-empts and reduces threats to the regime. Furthermore, the connections between national elites and their grassroots support basis are sometimes weak. The result is widening space for lower-level politico-military entrepreneurs, and sometimes the splintering of armed groups, as commanders deprived of the authority and resources gained from national elites fail to maintain local coherence.

Persistent impunity further feeds into this widening space. Few of the armed group leaders responsible for grave human rights violations have been held accountable. Similarly, the political and economic networks supporting armed groups have been able to operate relatively undisturbed, creating the impression that the risks associated with involvement in armed activity are low. Finally, local conflicts have remained volatile, creating further opportunities for politico-military entrepreneurs to reinforce their power position.

The volatility of local conflict dynamics

Over the past two decades, there has been limited progress with defusing local conflict dynamics in

the eastern Congo.[4] Thus, a multitude of conflicts, often related to local authority, identity and access to land and other natural resources, continues to create volatility. At the same time, the capacity for regulating conflicts has not significantly improved. Existing regulatory and legal frameworks are ambiguous, not applied, or poorly harmonized. Moreover, the capacity of civilian authorities in law enforcement is undermined by both military strongmen and feeble legitimacy. Donor-funded alternative dispute resolution mechanisms have not been able to compensate for this, and to solve cases blocked by elite interests and armed actor involvement.

Conflict dynamics feed into armed mobilization initiated or supported by local political actors, providing incentives and justifications for people to take up arms. Armed groups, for their part, try to seize upon and inflate these conflicts to mobilize popular and elite support, often claiming to represent the interests of a certain conflict party and their wider networks. These processes lead to a profound militarization of dispute settling, making conflicts ever harder to resolve. Where one party in a dispute makes use of armed actors to reinforce its position, competitors will feel pressure to follow suit. Due to the multitude of armed actors that may be present within the same area—whether other armed groups or army units—it is often not difficult to find armed allies. The result is a complex interplay between the presence of multiple armed factions and the presence of multiple local conflicts, in which local politico-military entrepreneurs are the lynchpin.

Counterproductive military policies

The policies that have been adopted up to now to address armed groups have not been able to stem their proliferation. In fact, they have been counterproductive. Previously, one of the main ways in which Congolese armed groups were convinced to lay down arms was through their negotiated integration into the *Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo* (FARDC, Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Government representatives, often FARDC officers and politicians, would start secretive negotiations with armed group leaderships on the terms of their integration. These mostly related to ranks and positions in the FARDC, unknown

amounts of cash and other informal payoffs, and in certain cases, guarantees that troops would not be redeployed far from their former strongholds. Where armed groups had political agendas, promises were sometimes made to address political demands, although these were not always listed in signed agreements. Furthermore, such demands were often not fully realized, leading to mutual accusations that the terms of the agreement had been violated.

Promising armed group leaders high ranks and positions—and granting them impunity for past crimes—created incentives for others to take up arms. Moreover, integrated officers sometimes deserted again when they judged payoffs to be disappointing, feared prosecution, or when pressure was raised to redeploy them far from their former strongholds. In other cases, only the main armed group leaders integrated into the army, leaving troops behind who continued under different commanders. Therefore, the policy of negotiations and army integration rarely managed to put a definite end to armed groups. Instead, it created a vicious circle whereby expected peace dividends skewed incentive structures in favour of armed mobilization. Additionally, it weakened the army, creating parallel command chains and divided loyalties. In sum, it stimulated rather than stemmed armed group proliferation.[5]

One of the reasons for the limited success of rebel integration was that it mostly played into the individual ambitions of armed group leaders. The political and economic actors supporting them and the rest of the armed group were generally not included—notably mid-level command and rank and file. Thus, their grievances and interests were left unaddressed. This often prompted second-tier leaders to return to the bush, especially where groups had limited internal cohesion.

Communities were similarly ignored in integration processes, and only limited provisions were made to help them come to terms with their violent past and complex connections to armed groups. Addressing grassroots dynamics was often also hampered by the continuing presence of a part of the integrated group, the arrival of a different armed group, or rampant insecurity resulting from the FARDC's failure to establish effective control and protect the population.

Aside from military integration, military operations constituted another strategy to address armed groups—one increasingly applied from 2009 onwards. Although these operations have occasionally weakened individual groups, they have done little to stem overall armed mobilization. This is exemplified by three successive military operations conducted from 2009 to 2012: *Umoja Wetu* ('Our Unity'), *Kimia* ('Silence') II, and *Amani Leo* ('Peace Today'). These operations dislodged and dispersed some of the bigger rebel movements that used to be dominant within their strongholds, notably the Rwandan-led *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR, Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda). Others disappeared due to army integration—including the *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP, National Congress for the Defence of the People) and the *Coalition des patriotes résistants congolais* (PARECO, Alliance of Resistant Congolese Patriots).[6] The areas formerly controlled by these groups have been subject to profound fragmentation. The FARDC did not manage effectively to occupy and secure these zones, leaving the population exposed to retaliatory attacks and plunder. This created space of movement for other armed groups and was seen to justify renewed mobilization for 'self-defence', in particular in areas with strong local conflict dynamics.

Many of those re-initiating armed mobilization were deserting FARDC officers who had previously served in rebel groups, acting in tandem with local authorities. These deserters were commonly not top ex-rebel leaders, but officers in mid-level positions who felt marginalized due to the dominance of certain power factions in the army formed along ethnic lines. This dynamic was strongly manifested during a 2011 army reform process called regimentation, when scores of officers who had been left out in the allocation of command positions deserted.

The electoral process in 2011 created a further impetus for armed group mobilization, as electoral candidates harnessed armed groups and engaged in ethnic outbidding to gain votes.[7] This was combined with a slump and intensifying tensions in the artisanal mining sector—a key engine of the eastern Congo's economy—due to plummeting commodity prices, the encroachment of industrial mining, and a changing regulatory framework.[8]

These various processes together set in motion a self-enforcing momentum of fragmentation. A growing number of small-scale armed groups reinforced insecurity and aggravated local conflicts, which in turn fed into new mobilization—including through splits of existing armed groups—and the further militarization of local conflicts.

Despite the limited success of military operations in stemming armed mobilization, the government has vigorously continued to pursue them. Confronted with a number of failed negotiation and integration processes during 2012 and 2013, the Kinshasa government decided to end the wholesale integration of armed groups into the FARDC. Rebel combatants can now still be integrated into the military, but on an individual basis and after completing training at the military bases of Kamina or Kitona. Those wanting to return to civilian life can, hypothetically, pass through a new disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programme, which was announced in December 2013. As the government failed, however, to mobilize the required funding and set up organizational structures, the plan has been slow to start.[9] Meanwhile, the *Sokola* ('Clean Up') I and II operations, launched in 2014 and 2015 against the foreign rebel movements FDLR and the Allied Democratic Forces, have created further volatility and fragmentation, not least as these groups are deeply embedded in local politics.[10]

Policy implications

The presence of a multitude of armed groups in the eastern Congo, which compete and collude in ever-shifting constellations, has created profound instability. For one thing it has complicated the identification of perpetrators. In some contexts, it has become increasingly difficult to ascribe atrocities and abuses to particular groups. This creates a climate of impunity and uncertainty. For another, populations are increasingly caught between competing armed factions, being accused of—and punished for—collaborating with one group or the other.

Furthermore, in severely fragmented contexts, any event affecting conflict dynamics and local power constellations, such as military operations, sets in motion chain reactions that can easily spiral out of control. Due to the presence of numerous inter-locking security dilemmas, the strengthening or

weakening of one faction may invite competitors to demonstrate their strength. This has deep implications for military operations. These commonly target one specific group only, and rarely lead the FARDC to establish effective control and security. Therefore, they often merely shake the kaleidoscope of armed groups, without diminishing their overall number or influence.

While military operations, as currently conducted, seem ineffective in this context of hyper-fragmentation, it is not easy to envisage what non-military interventions may work. The revised International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy, also known as I4S, puts a strong emphasis on community dialogue and local peacebuilding. Yet, unscrupulous politico-military entrepreneurs often hinder the resolution of local conflicts, harnessing them for their own interests. Time and again, armed groups and allied elites have torpedoed efforts at dialogue and reconciliation, for instance by presenting xenophobic opinions as community grievances. Furthermore, initiatives to address local conflict dynamics have sometimes been ill-conceived, being grounded in feeble analysis and failing to address the links between communities, armed groups, and hard-line elites. Also, given that in certain cases local conflicts feed armed group mobilization only indirectly, defusing them might not end armed group activity immediately, although it is a precondition for stability in the long term.

In sum, addressing armed group proliferation in the eastern Congo is challenging, and will be a long-term process. A first step, both for the Congolese government and international actors, could be to devise new policies specifically focusing on armed groups themselves. Beyond relatively

ad hoc military operations, there is currently no comprehensive policy in place to convince armed groups to lay down arms. For those willing to negotiate their surrender, it remains unclear what conditions and prospects they will be offered.

There are also limited efforts to tackle the political and economic elites who nourish armed mobilization—whether by holding them directly accountable, hampering their operations, or convincing them to change their conduct through social and moral pressure. Yet any efforts to address armed mobilization that do not engage this group are not likely to be sustainable.

Another process that is indispensable to ensure stability in the long term is army reform. Army deserters have played a key role in establishing new armed groups, which suggests a need to improve service conditions and better regulate the distribution of ranks and positions. Furthermore, without trust in the neutrality and protective capabilities of the army, populations will tend to support armed groups, if only as a last line of defence.

While less visible than bigger rebel movements—at least from an international point of view—smaller armed groups are a key source of insecurity and volatility. Not addressing these groups is likely to reduce any chance of improving the eastern Congo's dire security climate. Unfortunately, the government and international actors are at present mostly focused on the erratic electoral and decentralization processes under way. Since, in the current context of political and military fragmentation, these processes bode only further volatility, refocusing attention on armed groups seems essential.

Notes

1 Jason Stearns and Christoph Vogel, 'The Landscape of Armed Groups in Eastern Congo', Congo Research Group, Center on International Cooperation, December 2015. (http://congoresearchgroup.org/essay-the-landscape-of-armed-groups-in-eastern-congo-2/)

2 For a more extensive discussion on the processes underlying armed group mobilization, see Jason Stearns, Judith Verweijen, and Maria Eriksson Baaz, *The National Army and Armed Groups in the Eastern Congo: Untangling the Gordian Knot of Insecurity,* London: Rift Valley Institute, 2013. (http://riftvalley.net/publication/national-army-and-armed-groups-eastern-congo)

3 Jason Stearns, 'Causality and Conflict: Tracing the Origins of Armed Groups in the Eastern Congo', *Peacebuilding* 2/2 (2014): 157–71.

4 Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

5 Maria Eriksson Baaz and Judith Verweijen, 'The Volatility of a Half-cooked Bouillabaisse: Reflections on Rebel-military Integration and Conflict Dynamics in Eastern DRC', *African Affairs* 112/449 (2013): 563–82.

6 On the CNDP, see Jason Stearns, *From CNDP to M23: The Evolution of an Armed Movement in Eastern Congo,* London: Rift Valley Institute, 2012 (http://riftvalley.net/publication/cndp-m23); on the disintegration of PARECO, see Jason Stearns, *PARECO: Land, Local Strongmen and the Roots of Militia Politics in North Kivu,* London: Rift Valley Institute, 2013. (http://riftvalley.net/publication/pareco)

7 Stearns et al., *The National Army and Armed Groups in the Eastern Congo.*

8 Jeroen Cuvelier, Steven Van Bockstael, Koen Vlassenroot and Claude Iguma, 'Analyzing the Impact of the Dodd-Frank Act on Congolese Livelihoods', prepared for the DRC Affinity Group, New York: Social Science Research Council, 2014. (https://s3.amazonaws.com/ssrc-cdn1/crmuploads/new_publication_3/%7B57858126-EF65-E411-9403-005056AB4B80%7D.pdf)

9 Christoph Vogel, 'Congo's Immobilized Demobilization Plan', *christophvogel.net,* 12 November 2014. (http://christophvogel.net/2014/11/12/congos-immobilised-demobilisation-programme/)

10 UN Group of Experts on the DR Congo, S/2015/797, 'Mid-Term Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo', 16 October 2015. (http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2015_797.pdf)

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