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CONFLICT ESCALATION AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES: ASSESSING THE M23 INSURGENCY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY IN EAST AFRICA

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Abstract
The resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) insurgency in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has intensified armed confrontations, weakened local governance structures, and generated serious implications for regional stability in East Africa. Despite multiple peace agreements, international mediation efforts, and military interventions, the persistence of M23 highlights enduring governance deficits, fragile state authority, and unresolved political grievances within the conflict-affected provinces of North and South Kivu. This study examines the dynamics of the insurgency through the analytical lenses of conflict escalation and governance challenges, employing Regional Security Complex Theory to explain how localized insecurity in the DRC interacts with broader regional political and security dynamics. Drawing on secondary data from scholarly literature, policy reports, and international conflict databases, the study analyzes how insurgent activities exacerbate humanitarian crises, intensify population displacement, and strain diplomatic relations among neighboring states in East Africa. The findings suggest that the M23 insurgency is not merely a domestic security issue but part of a wider regional security complex in which cross-border political interests, resource competition, and weak governance structures reinforce patterns of instability. The study further highlights the roles of regional organizations, state actors, and international institutions in shaping conflict trajectories and peacebuilding efforts. By linking insurgent dynamics to governance deficits and regional security interactions, the paper contributes to scholarly debates on conflict governance, security sector reform, and cooperative regional mechanisms for sustainable peace in East Africa.

Keywords: M23 insurgency; Regional Security Complex Theory; conflict escalation; governance challenges; East Africa.

1.1 Introduction

The resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) insurgency in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has emerged as a critical security challenge with significant implications for regional stability in East Africa. M23, initially dormant for over a decade, re-emerged in 2022, rapidly expanding territorial control across North and South Kivu provinces and capturing key urban centers such as Goma and Bukavu (ACLED, 2023; Reuters, 2026a). These territorial gains have intensified local conflict dynamics, undermined state authority,

and heightened humanitarian crises. Recent clashes and drone strike by both M23 and government forces have further destabilized the region, violated ceasefire agreements and resulted in civilian casualties, including the deaths of humanitarian personnel in 2026 (Reuters, 2026b; AP News, 2026).

The humanitarian impact of the insurgency is profound. Estimates indicate that over seven million people are internally displaced within the DRC, while hundreds of thousands have fled to neighboring states due to insecurity (United Nations, 2025; Wikipedia, 2026). Food insecurity remains acute, with nearly 28 million people facing hunger in conflict-affected provinces (Reuters, 2025). These figures illustrate not only the scale of the crisis but also the challenges of governance in areas where state institutions are weak and multiple non-state actors operate with relative autonomy.

The persistence of M23 reflects broader governance and political economy challenges within the DRC and the wider region. Alleged support from neighboring states, the exploitation of mineral-rich territories, and fragmented security governance have enabled M23 to establish parallel administrative structures in occupied territories (ACLED, 2023). This complex interplay between armed conflict and governance deficits undermines both local and regional security, obstructing peacebuilding initiatives and eroding public trust.

This study situates the M23 insurgency within frameworks of conflict escalation and governance challenges, examining how institutional weaknesses and political dynamics interact to perpetuate violence and regional instability. By analyzing the insurgency's operational strategies, governance implications, and cross-border effects, the study contributes to ongoing debates on regional security, state capacity, and sustainable peacebuilding in East Africa.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) insurgency in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has intensified violent conflict and produced destabilizing effects that extend beyond national borders, posing a significant challenge to regional security in East Africa. Following a decade of dormancy, M23 re-emerged in 2022, rapidly expanding territorial control across North and South Kivu provinces and seizing strategic urban centers such as Goma and Bukavu (ACLED, 2023; Reuters, 2026a). These territorial gains have undermined the authority of the Congolese state and heightened insecurity in eastern DRC, resulting in frequent clashes between armed actors and government forces, widespread violations of ceasefire agreements, and recurrent civilian casualties. In 2026, drone strikes and ground offensives contributed to the deaths of humanitarian personnel and noncombatants, further exacerbating the humanitarian toll of the conflict (Reuters, 2026b; AP News, 2026).

The insurgency has also precipitated one of the largest displacement crises in sub-Saharan Africa, with over seven million individuals internally displaced and hundreds of thousands fleeing to neighboring countries such as Uganda and Rwanda (United Nations, 2025; Wikipedia, 2026). Acute food insecurity has emerged as a secondary effect, with nearly 28 million people in conflict-affected provinces facing hunger and limited access to basic services (Reuters, 2025). These statistics highlight not only the severity of the humanitarian crisis but also the governance deficits in areas where state institutions are weak or absent, creating opportunities for armed groups to consolidate control.

The persistence of M23 reflects deeper political economy and governance challenges within the DRC and the wider region. Allegations of external support to armed groups, exploitation of mineral-rich territories, and the establishment of parallel administrative structures underscore the limitations of existing governance frameworks and the fragility of peacekeeping mechanisms (ACLED, 2023). Despite repeated regional and international interventions, conflict escalation continues, signaling gaps in both strategic governance responses and scholarly understanding of the insurgency's long-term effects on regional security.

While prior research has examined M23 from military and humanitarian perspectives, there remains a significant gap in understanding the interplay between insurgent activity, governance deficits, and regional security dynamics. Most studies focus narrowly on localized violence or humanitarian impacts without systematically analyzing how institutional weaknesses at the state and regional levels facilitate insurgency resilience and transnational insecurity. This study addresses this gap by examining the causal pathways through which governance failures and fragmented authority structures enable M23 to persist and expand, thereby undermining peacebuilding efforts and regional stability in East Africa.

1.3 Research Questions

Building on the identified problem and research gap, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How has the resurgence of the M23 insurgency in eastern DRC influenced conflict escalation and the overall security environment in East Africa?
2. In what ways have governance deficits and institutional weaknesses within the DRC facilitated the persistence and operational capacity of M23?
3. How do cross-border dynamics, including alleged external support and regional political interactions, affect the resilience of M23 and the broader regional security landscape?
4. What policy and governance interventions could strengthen state authority and regional cooperation to mitigate insurgent activities and promote sustainable peace in conflict-affected areas?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) insurgency in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has generated far-reaching consequences for governance, security, and humanitarian stability across East Africa. Examining the dynamics of conflict escalation and governance challenges in relation to the M23 insurgency is therefore essential for understanding the evolving security landscape of the region. This study is significant because it contributes to scholarly, policy, and practical debates on insurgency, state fragility, and regional security cooperation.

From an academic perspective, the study enriches existing literature on conflict governance and insurgent movements in Africa. While numerous studies have examined armed conflict in the DRC, much of the existing scholarship focuses primarily on humanitarian crises, peacekeeping missions, or the political economy of natural resources. This research advances the discourse by integrating the analytical frameworks of conflict escalation and governance deficits to examine how institutional weaknesses, fragmented security structures, and regional political dynamics enable insurgent groups such as M23 to sustain operations. By situating the insurgency within broader regional security dynamics, the study contributes to theoretical

discussions on state capacity, conflict persistence, and the relationship between governance failures and armed violence.

The study is also significant for policymakers and regional security institutions. The persistence of the M23 insurgency has exposed limitations in national governance structures and regional peacekeeping efforts. By analyzing the interactions between insurgent activity, governance challenges, and cross-border security dynamics, this research provides insights that can inform policy responses aimed at strengthening state authority, enhancing regional cooperation, and improving conflict prevention strategies. These findings are particularly relevant for regional organizations and security mechanisms tasked with addressing transnational threats and promoting stability in East Africa.

In addition, the study contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable peacebuilding and conflict resolution in fragile states. Understanding how insurgent movements exploit governance gaps and socio-political grievances can help inform the design of inclusive governance reforms, security sector restructuring, and community-based peacebuilding initiatives. By highlighting the interconnected nature of conflict escalation, governance deficits, and regional insecurity, the study provides a foundation for developing more comprehensive approaches to conflict management and post-conflict stabilization.

Finally, the research holds practical relevance for humanitarian actors and development practitioners working in conflict-affected regions of the DRC and neighboring countries. Insights from this study can assist in designing interventions that address the structural drivers of instability while supporting governance reforms and resilience-building in vulnerable communities. Through this multidimensional contribution, the study underscores the importance of integrated governance and security strategies for achieving long-term peace and regional stability in East Africa.

1.5 Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach based primarily on secondary sources of data to investigate the dynamics of conflict escalation and governance challenges associated with the M23 insurgency in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and its implications for regional security in East Africa. The use of secondary data is appropriate for this research because it allows for a comprehensive examination of existing empirical evidence, policy reports, and scholarly analyses related to the insurgency, regional security dynamics, and governance structures in conflict-affected areas.

The study relies on a wide range of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic journals, books, policy reports, government publications, and credible international databases. Key sources include reports from international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and regional security institutions, as well as datasets and conflict monitoring platforms that document patterns of violence, displacement, and armed group activities in eastern DRC. In addition, reputable media reports and analytical briefings from conflict research organizations are utilized to provide up-to-date information on the resurgence of M23 and developments in the broader regional security environment.

Data collection involves a systematic review of relevant literature and documented evidence relating to the historical evolution of the M23 insurgency, governance deficits in eastern DRC, and the regional implications of armed conflict. Through this process, information is compiled and categorized according to key thematic areas such as conflict escalation,

governance challenges, humanitarian impacts, and cross-border security dynamics. The use of diverse secondary sources enables the triangulation of information, thereby enhancing the reliability and credibility of the analysis.

The analytical framework of the study is based on qualitative content analysis. This method allows the researcher to interpret and synthesize information from various sources in order to identify patterns, relationships, and causal mechanisms that explain the persistence and expansion of the M23 insurgency. Content analysis also facilitates the examination of how governance deficits, institutional weaknesses, and regional political dynamics interact to influence conflict escalation and regional security outcomes.

Furthermore, the study employs a descriptive and analytical research design. The descriptive component provides a detailed account of the historical background and contemporary developments of the M23 insurgency, while the analytical component examines the governance and security implications of the conflict within the broader context of East African regional stability. This dual approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the research problem and allows the study to link empirical observations with theoretical perspectives on conflict governance and regional security.

Although the study relies on secondary data, careful attention is given to the credibility, relevance, and reliability of the sources used. Priority is given to peer-reviewed academic publications, official institutional reports, and well-established conflict monitoring databases. This methodological approach ensures that the analysis is grounded in credible evidence while providing a robust foundation for examining the complex relationship between insurgent violence, governance deficits, and regional security in East Africa.

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Regional Security Complex Theory

This study is anchored in Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as its principal analytical framework for examining the resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) insurgency and its implications for regional security in East Africa. RSCT was developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver within the broader Copenhagen School of security studies to explain how security dynamics are geographically clustered and shaped by patterns of interdependence among neighboring states (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The theory emphasizes that security interactions are rarely confined within national boundaries; instead, they are embedded within regional systems in which the security of one state is closely linked to that of others. This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing the security dynamics of the Great Lakes region of Africa, where conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) frequently intersect with the political, military, and economic interests of neighboring countries such as Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi.

According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), a regional security complex emerges when a group of states become so interlinked through patterns of amity, rivalry, and security interdependence that their national security concerns cannot be understood or addressed in isolation. The proponents of the theory—Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde—argue that security threats are more likely to travel short geographical distances rather than long ones, which explains why neighboring states often share similar security challenges (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). RSCT therefore identifies regions as the most meaningful level for analyzing security interactions between the global system and domestic politics. In this context, conflicts originating within one state can easily spill across borders

through refugee movements, arms trafficking, cross-border insurgencies, and economic networks linked to illicit resource extraction.

The Great Lakes region provides a clear empirical illustration of this theoretical proposition. The resurgence of the M23 insurgency in eastern DRC since 2022 has demonstrated how domestic conflicts can quickly acquire regional dimensions. Reports indicate that the conflict has displaced more than seven million people within the DRC, with significant refugee flows into neighboring states including Uganda and Rwanda (United Nations, 2025). These population movements not only create humanitarian pressures but also alter regional security calculations, as host states face economic burdens, border security concerns, and political tensions linked to accusations of cross-border involvement in the conflict. Scholars such as Prunier (2009) argue that the conflicts in the eastern DRC cannot be separated from the broader geopolitical rivalries and historical grievances within the Great Lakes region, particularly those stemming from the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and subsequent regional wars.

The basic assumptions of RSCT can be summarized in several key propositions. First, security threats are regionally clustered because geographic proximity facilitates the transmission of conflict and insecurity. Second, states within a regional security complex develop patterns of amity and enmity that shape their security perceptions and foreign policy behavior. Third, regional security dynamics often involve both state and non-state actors, including insurgent movements, militias, and transnational criminal networks. Fourth, the stability or instability of a regional security complex depends on the degree of cooperation or rivalry among the states within it (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). These assumptions are particularly applicable to the M23 insurgency, which has been linked to cross-border political tensions and accusations of external support from neighboring states.

One of the major strengths of RSCT lies in its capacity to move beyond purely domestic or state-centric explanations of conflict. By emphasizing regional interdependence, the theory provides a broader analytical lens for understanding why insurgencies such as M23 persist despite national peace agreements and military interventions. For example, the continued presence of armed groups in eastern DRC has been associated with complex regional dynamics involving mineral resource competition, porous borders, and geopolitical rivalries among neighboring states. The eastern DRC contains vast deposits of coltan, cobalt, and gold—minerals that are critical to global technological industries—creating incentives for both local militias and transnational actors to sustain conflict networks (Autesserre, 2010). From the perspective of RSCT, these economic and political linkages reinforce patterns of regional insecurity and complicate peacebuilding efforts.

Another strength of RSCT is its ability to integrate the role of non-state actors into the analysis of regional security. Contemporary conflicts in Africa are rarely limited to interactions between formal state institutions; rather, they involve insurgent groups, local militias, and transnational criminal networks that operate across borders. The activities of M23 exemplify this phenomenon. Since its re-emergence in 2022, the group has reportedly captured strategic territories in North Kivu and challenged the authority of the Congolese state, demonstrating the capacity of non-state actors to reshape regional security dynamics. By incorporating such actors into its analytical framework, RSCT allows scholars to examine how internal conflicts interact with broader regional security structures.

Despite these analytical advantages, RSCT has certain limitations. Critics argue that the theory tends to emphasize interstate relations and elite security perspectives, sometimes underestimating the role of local governance failures, socio-economic grievances, and community-level dynamics in shaping conflict trajectories (Autesserre, 2010). For instance, while RSCT highlights regional rivalries and cross-border security interdependence, it may not fully capture how poverty, marginalization, and weak state institutions contribute to the recruitment and persistence of insurgent groups. Furthermore, the theory does not sufficiently account for the influence of global economic systems, particularly the role of international mineral markets and transnational corporate actors in sustaining conflict economies in resource-rich regions such as eastern DRC.

Nevertheless, the relevance of RSCT to this study remains significant. The resurgence of the M23 insurgency cannot be adequately explained solely by domestic political instability within the DRC. Instead, the conflict reflects a broader regional security environment characterized by porous borders, contested sovereignty, refugee flows, and competing geopolitical interests among neighboring states. By applying RSCT, this study provides a framework for understanding how regional security interdependence shapes the persistence of insurgencies and complicates peacebuilding efforts in the Great Lakes region.

From the author's perspective, RSCT offers a valuable conceptual lens for bridging the gap between domestic governance failures and regional security dynamics. While the theory highlights the structural relationships among states within a regional security complex, its explanatory power can be strengthened by integrating insights from political economy and governance studies. In the context of the M23 insurgency, combining RSCT with an analysis of governance deficits and resource politics allows for a more comprehensive understanding of why armed conflict persists despite repeated international interventions. Consequently, the application of RSCT in this study provides both theoretical and policy-relevant insights into the need for coordinated regional security mechanisms, stronger border governance, and collective diplomatic engagement to address the root causes of conflict escalation in East Africa.

2.2.1 Conceptual Clarification

Conceptual clarification is essential for analytical rigor, particularly in studies that engage complex and overlapping phenomena such as armed conflict, regional insecurity, and governance failures. This study is anchored on three interrelated concepts—insurgency, regional security dynamics, and governance challenges—which together provide the analytical foundation for examining the resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) and its implications for stability in East Africa. These concepts are not only central to the framing of the research problem but also guide the interpretation of empirical evidence and the theoretical positioning of the study within broader security and conflict literature. Clarifying them separately allows for a more precise understanding of how localized violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) escalates into a regional security concern and why repeated interventions have failed to produce sustainable peace.

2.2.2 Insurgency

Insurgency is commonly defined as an organized, protracted, and politically motivated struggle conducted by non-state actors against an established state authority with the aim of undermining state legitimacy, gaining territorial influence, or transforming the political order (O'Neill, 2005). Unlike conventional warfare between sovereign states, insurgencies typically employ asymmetric tactics such as guerrilla warfare, sabotage, political mobilization, and the

strategic exploitation of local grievances. These movements often combine military operations with ideological narratives that frame their actions around issues of marginalization, injustice, or exclusion in order to mobilize support from local populations and sympathetic external actors (Kilcullen, 2010). Contemporary scholarship further emphasizes that insurgencies are rarely purely military phenomena; rather, they are embedded within broader socio-economic and political contexts that shape their emergence, persistence, and transformation (Fearon & Laitin, 2003).

In many developing and fragile states, insurgent movements are closely connected to structural socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, weak governance institutions, and uneven development. Empirical studies indicate that regions characterized by high levels of economic inequality and limited state presence are more vulnerable to insurgent mobilization because such conditions create fertile ground for grievances and recruitment (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). For instance, communities that lack access to economic opportunities or basic public services may view insurgent groups as alternative providers of protection, employment, or political representation. In this sense, insurgency can be understood not only as a military confrontation but also as a manifestation of deeper governance and socio-economic failures.

Within the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) illustrates the complex relationship between insurgency, governance deficits, and socio-economic conditions. Although M23 has articulated political and ethnic grievances—particularly claims of defending the interests of Congolese Tutsi communities in eastern DRC—the movement operates within a broader political economy characterized by resource competition, weak state institutions, and transnational economic networks (Stearns, 2013). Eastern DRC is rich in strategic minerals such as coltan, cobalt, and gold, resources that are critical for global technology supply chains. Control over these resources has been linked to the financing of armed groups, including insurgent movements, which use mining revenues, taxation of local populations, and cross-border trade to sustain their military activities (Autesserre, 2010).

Socio-economic marginalization in conflict-affected provinces such as North and South Kivu further contributes to the persistence of insurgent groups. Despite the region's vast mineral wealth, local communities often experience high levels of poverty, limited infrastructure, and weak public service delivery. According to humanitarian reports, millions of people in eastern DRC face severe food insecurity and displacement due to ongoing conflict, creating conditions that can facilitate insurgent recruitment and community-level support (United Nations, 2024). These structural challenges illustrate how insurgency in the region is intertwined with broader socio-economic vulnerabilities.

The resilience of M23 also reflects the adaptive nature of modern insurgent movements. After its initial defeat in 2013, the group managed to reorganize and re-emerge nearly a decade later, demonstrating the ability of insurgent organizations to exploit political instability, unresolved peace agreements, and cross-border dynamics. Scholars argue that insurgent groups often survive because they operate within networks that connect local grievances, economic incentives, and regional political interests (Stearns, 2013; Prunier, 2009). In this context, insurgency becomes both a political strategy and an economic system sustained by access to resources, cross-border trade routes, and informal governance structures.

From the author's perspective, understanding insurgency in the DRC requires a multidimensional analytical approach that integrates political, economic, and social factors. While traditional security analyses tend to emphasize military capabilities and battlefield dynamics, contemporary research demonstrates that insurgencies are deeply embedded in governance failures and socio-economic inequalities. In the case of M23, the persistence of armed rebellion cannot be explained solely by ethnic or political grievances; rather, it reflects the intersection of weak state authority, competition over natural resources, and limited economic opportunities for local populations. Addressing insurgency in eastern DRC therefore requires not only military responses but also comprehensive governance reforms, economic development initiatives, and regional cooperation aimed at addressing the structural drivers of conflict.

2.2.3 Regional Security Dynamics

Regional security dynamics refer to the patterns of interaction, interdependence, and competition among states and non-state actors within a particular geographic region that shape the emergence, escalation, and management of security threats. In security studies, regional security dynamics emphasize how political instability, armed conflict, economic competition, and social vulnerabilities in one state can generate ripple effects that influence the security environment of neighboring countries (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). These dynamics are particularly pronounced in regions characterized by porous borders, shared ethnic communities, weak governance institutions, and transnational economic networks. In such contexts, security threats such as insurgency, terrorism, organized crime, and forced displacement often transcend national boundaries and require coordinated regional responses.

In East Africa and the broader Great Lakes region, regional security dynamics are deeply intertwined with socio-economic challenges, governance deficits, and historical political tensions. The resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) insurgency in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) illustrates how domestic conflict can evolve into a regional security issue. Since the re-emergence of the insurgency in 2022, fighting between M23 and the Congolese armed forces has significantly destabilized the provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu, leading to widespread humanitarian crises and cross-border tensions. Recent reports indicate that the conflict has displaced more than seven million people within the DRC, making it one of the largest displacement crises in Africa (UNHCR, 2025). Additionally, over one million Congolese refugees are currently hosted in neighboring countries, particularly Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, highlighting the transnational implications of the conflict.

The socio-economic consequences of these regional security dynamics are profound. Conflict in eastern DRC has disrupted agricultural production, trade routes, and local livelihoods, contributing to severe food insecurity across the region. Humanitarian assessments estimate that nearly 28 million people in the country face acute food insecurity, while millions of others remain dependent on humanitarian assistance due to the destruction of infrastructure and persistent insecurity (OCHA, 2025). These socio-economic pressures often reinforce cycles of instability, as communities affected by poverty, unemployment, and displacement may become vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups seeking local support or manpower.

The regional dimension of the M23 conflict further illustrates how security challenges in East Africa are shaped by complex political and economic interactions among neighboring states. The capture of key urban centers such as Goma in North Kivu by M23 forces in 2025 triggered diplomatic tensions between the DRC and Rwanda, with both countries exchanging

accusations of supporting rival armed groups. Such interstate rivalries illustrate the interconnected nature of regional security in the Great Lakes region, where conflicts are rarely confined within national borders. Cross-border trade networks, refugee movements, and the circulation of small arms further intensify these dynamics.

Scholars argue that the persistence of insecurity in eastern DRC is closely linked to competition over natural resources and the broader political economy of the region. The eastern provinces contain vast deposits of minerals such as coltan, cobalt, and gold, which are essential for global electronics and battery production. Control over these resources has been a major driver of armed conflict, as insurgent groups, local militias, and transnational networks seek to exploit mining revenues and informal trade routes (Autesserre, 2010; Stearns, 2013). From a socio-economic perspective, this resource-based conflict economy sustains armed groups while simultaneously undermining state authority and regional stability.

From the author's analytical perspective, regional security dynamics in East Africa cannot be fully understood without considering the intersection between security threats and socio-economic vulnerabilities. While military confrontations between insurgent groups and state forces often dominate policy debates, the underlying drivers of instability frequently lie in structural governance challenges, economic marginalization, and the unequal distribution of natural resource wealth. In the case of the M23 insurgency, weak border governance, unresolved political grievances, and regional geopolitical rivalries have created a security environment in which insurgent movements can operate across national boundaries.

Therefore, addressing regional security challenges in East Africa requires a multidimensional approach that integrates security cooperation, economic development, and governance reforms. Strengthening regional institutions such as the East African Community (EAC) and improving cross-border security coordination are essential for managing transnational threats. At the same time, long-term stability depends on addressing socio-economic inequalities, promoting inclusive governance, and ensuring that the benefits of natural resource wealth contribute to local development rather than fueling conflict economies.

2.2.4 Governance Challenges

Governance challenges refer to the structural weaknesses in political institutions, administrative capacity, rule of law, and socio-economic management that undermine the ability of a state to effectively exercise authority, provide public services, and maintain security within its territory. In fragile and conflict-affected states, governance deficits often manifest in the form of weak institutional legitimacy, corruption, limited state presence in peripheral regions, and ineffective security sector coordination (Rotberg, 2010). These conditions create environments in which non-state actors, including insurgent groups, militias, and criminal networks, can exploit institutional gaps to establish parallel authority structures. In the context of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), governance challenges are deeply intertwined with the persistence of armed conflict and the resurgence of insurgent movements such as the March 23 Movement (M23).

One of the most significant governance challenges in eastern DRC is the limited capacity of the state to exercise effective territorial control. Although the DRC is one of the largest countries in Africa, its vast geography and weak administrative structures have historically constrained the government's ability to maintain authority in remote regions. According to the World Bank (2023), the country ranks among the lowest globally in governance

indicators such as government effectiveness, rule of law, and control of corruption. These institutional weaknesses are particularly pronounced in the eastern provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu, where multiple armed groups operate and state institutions struggle to maintain consistent administrative and security presence.

The resurgence of M23 since 2022 illustrates how governance deficits contribute to conflict persistence. The insurgent group has managed to capture strategic territories and challenge the authority of the Congolese state, particularly in areas with limited government presence. Reports indicate that the ongoing conflict has displaced more than seven million people within the DRC, creating one of the largest internal displacement crises in Africa (United Nations, 2025). Such large-scale displacement not only reflects the humanitarian consequences of weak governance but also further undermines state capacity, as local administrations become overwhelmed by the social and economic pressures associated with mass population movements.

Socio-economic inequalities represent another dimension of governance challenges in the region. Despite possessing vast mineral resources—including cobalt, coltan, and gold—the DRC continues to experience widespread poverty and underdevelopment. The World Bank (2024) estimates that more than 60 percent of the Congolese population lives below the international poverty line. In conflict-affected regions, economic marginalization is even more severe, with communities facing limited access to education, healthcare, and infrastructure. These conditions contribute to social grievances and create recruitment opportunities for insurgent groups that promise economic benefits, protection, or political representation.

Resource governance further complicates the socio-economic and security dynamics of the conflict. Eastern DRC is home to some of the world's most valuable mineral deposits, which are essential for global industries such as electronics and renewable energy technologies. However, the governance of these resources remains weak, allowing armed groups and illicit networks to exploit mining activities and cross-border trade routes. Autesserre (2010) argues that the competition over mineral resources has become a central driver of violence in eastern Congo, as armed actors use resource revenues to finance their operations and maintain territorial control. In the case of M23, access to strategic areas near mineral-rich zones has enhanced the group's economic resilience and operational capacity.

Political dynamics at both the national and regional levels also contribute to governance challenges in the DRC. The country's political system has historically been characterized by fragile state institutions, contested electoral processes, and limited accountability mechanisms. Such conditions weaken public trust in government institutions and hinder effective conflict resolution. Furthermore, regional geopolitical tensions involving neighboring states such as Rwanda and Uganda have added complexity to the governance environment. Scholars note that cross-border political rivalries and security concerns often shape the responses of regional actors to insurgent movements in eastern DRC (Prunier, 2009). These dynamics illustrate how domestic governance challenges intersect with broader regional security interests.

From a security perspective, governance deficits are closely linked to the fragmentation of the security sector. The Congolese armed forces have faced persistent challenges related to limited training, inadequate resources, and weak command structures. As a result, state security forces have struggled to contain insurgent activities and protect civilian populations

effectively. In some instances, local communities have relied on informal militias or community-based defense groups for protection, further complicating the security landscape. Such fragmentation weakens the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force and creates opportunities for insurgent groups to expand their influence.

From the author's analytical perspective, governance challenges in eastern DRC cannot be understood solely as administrative or institutional deficiencies. Rather, they represent a complex interaction between socio-economic inequalities, political instability, and security fragmentation. While insurgent groups such as M23 exploit these governance gaps, the persistence of conflict also reinforces institutional weaknesses by diverting state resources away from development priorities and undermining long-term state-building efforts.

Addressing these governance challenges therefore requires a comprehensive approach that integrates political reform, economic development, and security sector strengthening. Improving resource governance, enhancing local administrative capacity, and promoting inclusive political participation are critical steps toward restoring state legitimacy and reducing the incentives for insurgent mobilization. Additionally, stronger regional cooperation mechanisms are necessary to address cross-border security threats and prevent the externalization of domestic conflicts. Without such reforms, governance deficits are likely to continue fueling cycles of instability and conflict in eastern DRC and the broader East African region.

2.3.1 Empirical Literature

The empirical evidence on the March 23 Movement (M23) underscores the persistent and adaptive nature of insurgency in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and its broader implications for regional security in East Africa. Between 2021 and 2023, M23 was responsible for over 2,000 fatalities and the displacement of approximately 300,000 civilians, while critical infrastructure in North Kivu province, including health facilities, schools, and transportation networks, was severely disrupted (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA], 2023). These figures not only illustrate the immediate humanitarian consequences of the insurgency but also highlight the structural vulnerability of the Congolese state in managing armed conflict, reinforcing governance gaps, and protecting its citizens.

The recurring mobilization of M23 demonstrates the limitations of existing peace frameworks, notably the 2013 Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework, which sought to integrate former combatants, reform the security sector, and curtail external support to armed groups (International Crisis Group, 2023). The failure to implement key provisions of this framework indicates that formal agreements, in the absence of robust institutional capacity, cannot prevent the reconstitution of armed groups. This aligns with the conceptual understanding of governance challenges, where weak institutional capacity, fragmented authority, and inadequate enforcement mechanisms provide fertile ground for insurgency (Rotberg, 2004; Autesserre, 2010).

From a regional security perspective, M23's resurgence exemplifies the dynamics described by the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). The spillover effects of the insurgency—including cross-border movements of combatants, refugee flows, and illicit trafficking of arms and minerals—demonstrate how insecurity in the DRC cannot be addressed in isolation (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Neighboring states, particularly Rwanda and Uganda, are drawn into the conflict through both direct and indirect involvement, whether via alleged support to

armed groups or the management of refugee populations. The insurgency, therefore, operates within a regional security complex characterized by interdependent threats, mutual suspicion, and fragmented security cooperation, which complicates efforts to achieve sustainable peace.

Economic drivers further compound the insurgency's resilience. M23's access to revenue streams from illicit mineral exploitation, including coltan and gold, illustrates the intersection of political, economic, and security factors that sustain the group's operational capacity (Titeca & Vlassenroot, 2012; UN Group of Experts, 2023). The control of such resources not only funds military operations but also fosters corruption and entrenches local networks of patronage that undermine state authority. Empirical examples, such as the temporary capture of Bunagana in November 2022, demonstrate how territorial control over strategic trade routes and resource-rich areas allows M23 to exert influence beyond the immediate conflict zone, affecting regional economic stability (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The discussion further reveals that the persistence of M23 reflects broader limitations in regional peace and security governance. Although regional organizations, including the East African Community (EAC) and the African Union (AU), have deployed peacekeeping and mediation initiatives, these efforts remain largely reactive, fragmented, and constrained by divergent national interests (African Union, 2023). The absence of coordinated, multidimensional interventions—encompassing governance reform, economic regulation, and border security—underscores the need for integrated strategies that address both the immediate military threats and the underlying structural conditions enabling insurgency.

Furthermore, the empirical findings highlight the interconnectedness of structural weaknesses, economic imperatives, and regional security interdependencies in sustaining M23. By situating these insights within RSCT and governance frameworks, this discussion demonstrates that effective conflict management in the Great Lakes region requires not only military containment but also strengthened institutional capacity, regional cooperation, and mechanisms to disrupt illicit economies. Addressing these factors is critical for breaking the cyclical pattern of insurgency and advancing durable peace in East Africa.

3.1 Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are organized around the four research questions and provide an integrated analysis of how the resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) insurgency has influenced conflict escalation, governance challenges, and regional security dynamics in East Africa. Drawing on secondary sources, policy reports, and scholarly analyses, the findings highlight the interconnected relationship between domestic governance deficits, cross-border political dynamics, and the persistence of insurgent movements in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

First, the study finds that the resurgence of M23 has significantly intensified conflict escalation in eastern DRC, thereby destabilizing the broader regional security environment in East Africa. Since the renewed offensive in 2022, M23 forces have expanded territorial control in parts of North Kivu, particularly around strategic locations near the city of Goma. The United Nations estimates that the renewed conflict has contributed to the displacement of over seven million people across the DRC, making it one of the largest internal displacement crises globally (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2024). This escalation has strained regional humanitarian systems and increased refugee flows into neighboring countries such as Uganda and Rwanda. The findings therefore confirm that localized insurgent activity in eastern DRC quickly evolves into a regional

security challenge due to the interconnected political and economic structures of the Great Lakes region.

Second, the study finds that governance deficits and institutional weaknesses within the DRC have significantly facilitated the persistence and operational capacity of M23. Weak state institutions, limited administrative presence in peripheral regions, and ineffective security sector management have created a permissive environment for insurgent groups to operate. According to the World Bank (2023), the DRC ranks among the lowest countries globally in governance indicators, particularly in areas such as rule of law and government effectiveness. These institutional weaknesses have limited the state's ability to maintain territorial control and provide essential public services in conflict-affected regions. As a result, insurgent groups are often able to exploit local grievances related to economic marginalization, insecurity, and perceived political exclusion. The findings suggest that governance challenges in eastern DRC are not merely administrative shortcomings but structural issues embedded in the country's political and economic systems.

Third, the study finds that cross-border dynamics and regional political interactions play a critical role in sustaining the resilience of M23 and shaping the broader regional security landscape. Allegations of external support from neighboring states have intensified diplomatic tensions within the Great Lakes region, complicating efforts to resolve the conflict through regional mechanisms. Scholars note that insurgent groups in eastern DRC often operate within transnational networks that involve cross-border trade routes, informal economic exchanges, and ethnic linkages that extend beyond national boundaries (Stearns, 2013). These transnational dynamics allow armed groups to access logistical support, safe havens, and financial resources that enhance their operational resilience. The findings therefore reinforce the argument advanced by Regional Security Complex Theory that security threats within geographically proximate states are deeply interconnected and cannot be effectively addressed through purely domestic policy responses (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Fourth, the study identifies several policy and governance interventions that could strengthen state authority and enhance regional cooperation in addressing insurgent activities. The findings indicate that sustainable conflict resolution requires a multidimensional strategy that integrates governance reform, security sector strengthening, and regional diplomatic engagement. At the domestic level, improving institutional accountability, expanding state administrative presence in peripheral regions, and reforming the security sector are essential for restoring public trust in state institutions. At the regional level, enhanced cooperation among East African states through mechanisms such as joint security operations and intelligence-sharing frameworks could help address the transnational dimensions of insurgent activities. Additionally, strengthening economic development initiatives in conflict-affected communities could reduce the socio-economic grievances that insurgent groups often exploit for recruitment.

From the author's analytical perspective, the persistence of the M23 insurgency reflects the complex interaction between governance deficits, socio-economic inequalities, and regional geopolitical competition. While military interventions remain an important component of conflict management, the findings suggest that security-focused approaches alone are insufficient for achieving long-term stability. Instead, sustainable peace in eastern DRC and the broader East African region requires comprehensive governance reforms, inclusive economic development strategies, and stronger regional institutions capable of addressing shared security challenges.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the resurgence of M23 is not an isolated insurgent phenomenon but rather a manifestation of deeper structural problems within the political economy and governance architecture of the DRC and the Great Lakes region. Addressing these underlying challenges is therefore essential for preventing further conflict escalation and promoting durable peace in East Africa.

4.1 Conclusion

This study examined the resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) insurgency in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and its implications for conflict escalation, governance challenges, and regional security dynamics in East Africa. Drawing on the analytical framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the study demonstrates that the persistence of the M23 insurgency cannot be adequately understood solely within the domestic political context of the DRC. Rather, the conflict reflects a complex interaction of internal governance deficits, socio-economic inequalities, and cross-border political dynamics that collectively shape the broader security environment of the Great Lakes region.

The findings reveal that the renewed activities of M23 since 2022 have significantly intensified armed confrontations in eastern DRC, contributing to large-scale humanitarian crises and widespread population displacement. The escalation of violence has not only weakened local governance structures but has also generated regional security concerns due to refugee flows, cross-border tensions, and the involvement of external actors. These developments underscore the interconnected nature of security challenges in East Africa, where conflicts in one state often generate ripple effects that influence the stability of neighboring countries.

Furthermore, the study highlights that governance deficits within the DRC—particularly weak institutional capacity, ineffective security sector management, and inadequate resource governance—have created conditions that allow insurgent groups to persist and adapt. The inability of the state to maintain effective territorial control in peripheral regions has enabled armed groups to exploit local grievances related to economic marginalization, insecurity, and political exclusion. Consequently, the persistence of insurgency in eastern DRC reflects deeper structural challenges associated with state fragility, uneven development, and contested political authority.

The research also demonstrates that regional political dynamics and cross-border interactions significantly influence the resilience of M23 and the broader conflict environment. The Great Lakes region is characterized by complex security interdependencies involving ethnic networks, economic linkages, and geopolitical rivalries among neighboring states. These factors often complicate peacebuilding efforts and hinder coordinated regional responses to insurgent activities. As a result, addressing the M23 insurgency requires not only domestic reforms within the DRC but also stronger regional cooperation mechanisms capable of managing transnational security threats.

From a policy perspective, the study underscores the importance of adopting a multidimensional approach to conflict resolution and governance reform. Strengthening state institutions, improving resource governance, and expanding socio-economic development in conflict-affected regions are essential for addressing the underlying drivers of insurgency. At the same time, regional organizations and international partners must enhance diplomatic engagement, security coordination, and peacebuilding initiatives to prevent the externalization of domestic conflicts across national borders.

In conclusion, the resurgence of the M23 insurgency illustrates the broader challenges of governance, security, and development that continue to shape the political landscape of eastern DRC and the Great Lakes region. Sustainable peace will depend on the ability of national and regional actors to address both the immediate security threats posed by insurgent movements and the deeper structural conditions that perpetuate cycles of conflict. By situating the M23 crisis within the broader framework of regional security dynamics and governance challenges, this study contributes to ongoing scholarly and policy debates on conflict management, state resilience, and regional cooperation in East Africa.

5.1 Recommendations

Drawing on the study's findings and the identified research questions, several policy and scholarly recommendations emerge for addressing the resurgence of the M23 insurgency and its broader implications for conflict escalation and regional security in East Africa. These recommendations focus on strengthening governance institutions, enhancing regional security cooperation, and addressing the socio-economic conditions that contribute to the persistence of insurgent movements.

First, there is a critical need to strengthen state institutional capacity and governance structures within the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Weak administrative presence, fragile rule-of-law institutions, and ineffective public service delivery have created governance gaps that insurgent groups exploit. The Congolese government should prioritize comprehensive governance reforms that enhance transparency, improve local administrative capacity, and strengthen the rule of law in conflict-affected regions, particularly in North Kivu and South Kivu. Strengthening local government institutions and expanding state presence in peripheral regions would reduce the ability of armed groups to establish alternative authority structures and exploit local grievances.

Second, reforming and professionalizing the security sector remains essential for restoring state authority and improving civilian protection. The Congolese Armed Forces have historically faced challenges related to inadequate training, poor logistics, and fragmented command structures. A comprehensive security sector reform program should focus on improving military professionalism, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and enhancing coordination between military, police, and intelligence institutions. Effective security governance would increase the capacity of the state to counter insurgent activities while reducing human rights violations that often undermine public trust in state institutions.

Third, regional cooperation among East African states should be significantly strengthened to address the transnational dimensions of insurgency. The M23 conflict demonstrates that armed groups often operate within cross-border networks involving illicit trade routes, refugee movements, and political alliances. Regional organizations such as the East African Community (EAC) and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) should enhance intelligence-sharing mechanisms, joint border patrols, and coordinated peacekeeping initiatives to address cross-border security threats. Such collaborative efforts are necessary to prevent insurgent groups from exploiting regional political divisions and weak border governance.

Fourth, diplomatic engagement and conflict mediation initiatives must be reinforced to address interstate tensions that contribute to the persistence of the conflict. Allegations of external support to armed groups have frequently strained relations among countries in the Great Lakes region, thereby complicating peacebuilding efforts. Regional and international

actors should prioritize confidence-building measures, structured dialogue platforms, and diplomatic mediation processes aimed at reducing geopolitical rivalries and strengthening trust among regional governments. Sustainable peace in eastern DRC will depend on the willingness of regional actors to pursue cooperative security frameworks rather than unilateral approaches.

Fifth, addressing the socio-economic drivers of conflict is essential for reducing the recruitment base of insurgent movements. Many communities in eastern DRC experience high levels of poverty, unemployment, and limited access to social services despite the region's abundant natural resources. Policies aimed at promoting inclusive economic development—such as investments in infrastructure, education, agriculture, and local enterprise—can help reduce socio-economic grievances that armed groups often exploit. Additionally, strengthening transparency and accountability in the management of mineral resources would reduce the role of illicit economies that finance insurgent activities.

Finally, future scholarly research should expand interdisciplinary investigations into the relationship between governance deficits, resource politics, and insurgent mobilization in the Great Lakes region. While existing studies have examined individual aspects of the conflict, further research is needed to better understand the evolving political economy of armed groups and the effectiveness of regional security frameworks. Such research would provide valuable insights for policymakers and international organizations seeking to design evidence-based strategies for conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Overall, the successful mitigation of insurgent activities such as those associated with the M23 movement requires a comprehensive approach that integrates governance reforms, regional security cooperation, and socio-economic development. Without addressing these interconnected structural challenges, the cycles of conflict and instability that characterize eastern DRC and the broader East African region are likely to persist.

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