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WEBINAR

THE DRC AT A CROSSROADS:
PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESSION AND CONFLICT IN THE EAST

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PANEL

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O'HANLON: Greetings everyone, and welcome to our Brookings event. I'm Michael O'Hanlon with the Africa Security Initiative at Brookings, and I'm very pleased today to join with two colleagues, two Congolese citizens and remarkable human rights activists and students of their country who are working hard at an organization called Ebuteli, as well as through other means to promote good governance in Congo, as well as peace in the east.

Those are the topics before us today. This has been a longstanding theme in Brookings' work on Congo, and of course, a longstanding set of issues and problems for the Democratic Republic of Congo over the years, as we've now seen on-and-off conflict of various types for three decades in the east of Congo.

And of course, we've had the uncertainties about presidential transitions and the establishment of a stronger and more transparent democracy in Congo, going back to the days when I was a Peace Corps volunteer there, and there was no democracy, and Mobutu Sese Seko ruled the land. So these are the topics we'd like to discuss.

Again, I am thrilled to have Fred Bauma and Reagan Miviri joining me. We hope also that Jason Stearns may join in later as well. As I say Fred and Reagan both work with Ebuteli, a Congo-based organization that works on public policy and democracy and peace in Congo. Jason is also a professor at Simon Fraser University in western Canada, and formed originally the Congo Research Group at the Center on International Cooperation at New York University, where Fred has also been affiliated at times in the past.

So let me first just say, gentlemen, thank you for joining us. Welcome to Brookings. Greatly appreciate your time. And what I'd like to do to launch right in, we're gonna have a fireside chat conversation, so to speak where Fred and Reagan and I discuss various issues centered on two broad categories.

One, again, being conflict in the east, and the other being political reform, democracy, and presidential transition or lack thereof. And we will go back and forth with ourselves, and then look forward to your questions. If you wish, you can email them to Brookings... Or excuse me, to events @brookings.edu and they can get filtered through me, and then I'll pose those questions later in the hour to Reagan and Fred, and possibly Jason if he joins.

So gentlemen, let me begin, if I could, with you, Fred, and I really just wanna ask you to frame where we are in Congo today, and we've got these two big questions before us. So you can either address one or both. But let me ask you, do you see any major trends or developments of note in the conflict in the east?

We all know the Ebola crisis is serious. We all know M23 is still a big problem. There really is no, as far as I can tell, no huge progress towards true peace, even though we had two major ceremonies in 2025 involving President Trump and leaders of Rwanda and DRC trying to create a mechanism to bring more stability and economic development to the east.

But I think the conflict is still preventing that. Please tell me if I'm right and what you see about trends there. And of course, we'll want to get into the presidential transition issue where it appears President Tshisekedi is interested in changing the constitution to allow him to run for a third term in a couple of years, or perhaps simply suspending the normal electoral calendar because of conflict in the east.

He's alluded to both these possibilities in recent months, but we'll get to that later. Please feel free to start with either question. And now, Fred, over to you

BAUMA: Thank you so much Michael, for the invitation and always happy to attend this, this kind of discussions. Where are we now? I think the easier answer to say is that we are at the crossroads in DRC between many opposite trends, I would say. One positive trend is that the country has managed to mobilize more money than before. So, economically, there is the, the national budgets increase significantly. There is a lot of public infrastructure projects here and there across the country. And there is a sentiment in some areas in Kinshasa, for example of a limited economic prosperity, especially limited in a, in area inhabited by Kinshasa elite.

That trend is very opposed to two other situations. One is the the conflict in Eastern DRC where M23 backed by Rwanda is continuing to reinforce its position in the South Kivu and in North Kivu, but also in other parts of the Kivus and Ituri where ADF group, the, the Ugandan group is committing a lot of atrocity, even more atrocity now than in the last couple of years.

And Reagan maybe may mention this very well. We have also another trend is a clear democratic backsliding or the risk of it at least. We-- the, President Tshisekedi is going through the end of his is in the middle of the, his second and last term, and he has make, made clear that he is willing to accept a third term if he's asked to, and his political coalition has launched a campaign to or find way to change the constitution, which will very likely increase political instability in in DRC.

And in the middle of all this, we have an Ebola crisis that is not helping, especially in, In North Kivu, in Ituri, and in another province in, in the Tshopo province. So I can say that the country the, the economic, the visible economic or financial progress is very contrasted by the serious conflict and violent trend in the DRC and and health crisis that we are facing.

And I would say the the last thing of where we are is, I think a lack of courage from the statesmen in power To come together in an idea of finding a solution to the crisis. So everyone, and especially those in power, are using a using conflict as a, a something that they can score goal on political sphere.

So using the conflict for not organizing the election or using the conflict for creating a larger coalition, and instead of trying to resolve in a sustainable way this conflict. And the only victim, I would say, is the people who continue to suffer in DRC and those people who fought for democracy and who are seeing many of the progress that we gained in the streets being completely ignored.

O'HANLON: Right. Thank you very much for that excellent framing. And I want to come back to some of the realistic policy options that people have, perhaps either within Congo to work together more effectively, as you mentioned, to try to bring peace and advance democracy, but also in the United States, any suggestions you would have for American policymakers as they try to nudge this.

We'll come back to you in just a second. But Ragan, first, I wanted to ask for your overall sense of things, including the good news that Fred just mentioned. And I know you spend a lot of time in Kinshasa these days, and I, as a former Peace Corps volunteer there forty years ago, would love to hear more about what it feels like to be in Kinshasa or any other major Congolese city or the countryside.

Is there a sense of energy? Is there a sense of economic progress or is that really localized, as Fred implied, to some localized parts of the country and certain very specific parts of the

population? But also your sense on the conflict and where it's headed and the trend lines that you've seen over the last few months.

Over to you, please.

MIVIRI: Thank you. Yes, I think these two question are really linked because when you speak about the economic prosperity, and at the same time we are in the middle of a, a conflict sometime you can think that's probably the, the parts which are affected by insecurity are the only one where you can experience like a poverty.

But now, unfortunately, even in some places where there is no conflict, like the Kasai, the region from which the president is coming from, actually, it's also one of the places where there is a lot of malnutrition and poverty and the lack of economic future. So you will see a lot of people coming from this region going to Kinshasa and some others going to Lubumbashi.

And there is really a big rural exalt where people are really leaving some places to go to these major cities where they think that they can have some more brighter future. But unfortunately, within like Kinshasa, I just left Kinshasa some weeks ago, and what you see in the cities that unfortunately people are really suffering.

So at the same time you have an elite which is linked to the power, which is really, receiving a lot of money. And so, so again another topic that we could even talk about is also corruption. So we see in the middle of this political crisis, security crisis health crisis, there is also this topic about corruption, where there is some people who are still can have their lifestyle being, growing up and up because of of the corruption.

There is also some people who just need something to eat. So that's a big issue as well, and I think that can also be some of the, the ingredient to this political crisis and to also to this security crisis. Because like, last time when we see people were mobilizing for the protest against this change of of the constitution that Fred was speaking about, some were just coming just because they think that's not the priority.

The priority for them is their economic welfare. And if they don't see that being a priority, then they will- they ask themselves, "Why are you just trying to change the constitution? Is the constitution change will come up and just change my, my, my way of living?" So yes, I think those are the major question which are really important on the ground.

O'HANLON: Great. Thank you for the framing as well. So what I'd like to do next is ask you both for a little bit more detail to the extent you've got a, a sense of where we are in the war in the East. But but I realize that, you know, neither one of you is there right now, and you both do research based on what's going on in the East, and so you s- you have some more details.

So I just would wanna ask you each to share a couple of perspectives about trends. And then after we do that, I wanna come back and ask for ideas about what we can do about the conflict, and then we'll go back to politics and presidential elections, and the US role, and also the China element you know, and how all these pieces are interwoven along with the anti-corruption concerns, Ragan, that you just mentioned.

So on the East again, Jason Stearns wrote an outstanding book, *The War That Doesn't Say Its Name*, *La Guerre Qui Ne Dit Pas Son Nom*, and that was written a few years ago. But it

was a really brilliant title, I thought, and he got that title, of course, from one of the people in the east that he was speaking to, who basically acknowledged that the east of Congo has just been a conflict zone or an anarchic zone of limited government or both for 30 years, really going back to the Rwanda genocide and even to the decline of Congo in the latter Mobutu years.

And so, I just wanted to ask, you know, here we are in the middle of twenty twenty-six. Is the war getting worse? Is the war easing in some ways? I don't think there have been major new offensives in the last few months, but I also don't sense that there's any greater stability. And so I was just gonna ask you am I right about that?

Are we sort of in a, just in a steady state of low-grade violence, or is there any trend line in terms of the government gaining more control as the UN force gradually scales back and ultimately leaves perhaps in the next year or two? Anything you can share by the overall trajectory of this terrible ongoing conflict.

And Fred, I'll start with you again, please.

BAUMA: Well, I think we have reached the time where Jason's *la guerre qui ne dit pas son nom*, the war that doesn't say its name, has ended up saying its name. I think we are not in a, In a situation of a latent conflict where we in some areas, it's a, it's an active war with a lot of clashes, with massive displacement and so on. So that is the first thing.

In terms of what I see in the region, and Reagan, feel free to contradict me, yeah. But I think we are reaching a sort of normalization of of the conflict especially with regard to the situation with M23. Because for many reasons, and especially in the following of US involvement in the conflicts the-- Kinshasa doesn't perceive M23 so far, maybe this may change, but as a threat to to the central government in Kinshasa.

At the same time the war in the east the the M23 is consolidating its power in different in the area that is controlled. It's imposing new -- It's installing new administration, it's imposing taxes, it's building, it's providing in some area public services, and it's progressively expanding towards the south in in South Kivu, but also attempting to progress in the north with a lot of difficulty.

So we live so since since December, I would say, or since January of last year there is a, a... M23 has become a sort of new reality in in, in the east. And when you listen to narratives in Kinshasa, even if the conflict is very present in the term, like, the, in, the the war is very present in the narratives, but in the actions and in willingness to end it by any mean, there is a lot of incoherence.

So at the end of the day, the country is effectively divided. People in in, in the east, in North Kivu, in South Kivu, live under a different regime completely. It's very difficult to move from Kinshasa to the east and the other way. And the two, in the, the two spaces the life is becoming normalized under, under occupation.

There is a lot of peace processes. But the other thing that we can see on the conflict side is the multiplication of peace processes. The the Doha process, the Washington process, the African Union process recently the, the Catholic and Protestant church process. So it's as if we are multiplying those peace processes without a proper coherence within those processes. And it pushes both-- all sides of the conflict to choose the forum that suits them the most. So the more peace processes multiply, the more instruments of monitoring

ceasefire multiply. But the more conflicts expand, there is no effective ceasefire on the ground and so on.

And the last threat in on, on the conflict side is the link between politics and conflicts. And I will get-- we, we will get there later. But there is a sentiment especially for opposition leaders in Kinshasa that because the government is accepting to discuss only with those who hold guns, the government is encouraging somehow, indirectly indirectly violence. And even though the-- even the discussion with those who have guns is not going anywhere. So there is a risk of creating other dynamic on, on the on the political side.

And the last thing, and we can come back to this, is in my view, the contradiction between two sets of policies that the US government has pushed in, in its attempts to resolve the conflict in east and DRC. The contradiction between the regional economic integration framework, the logic of that framework, and the logic of the, the strategic partnership agreements between the Congolese government and the, the US government. But we can come back to it later.

O'HANLON: Thank you very much. And so, Reagan, over to you for your sense of the conflict, the trend lines, la guerre qui, qui dix on no the war that's maybe very real and before us right now, as Fred's just said, and also anything you want to say about the peace processes, the various mechanisms that Fred just mentioned, the Washington angle, the South Africa angle, the African Union angle, or the United Arab Emirates.

Anything you want to say? Is there any movement in any of those? Any sign of life whatsoever? Over to you.

MIVIRI: Yes. Probably I'll go back first to what is happening on the ground, 'cause I, I didn't say it, but I left Goma because M23 took over. So I used to live in Goma, and it was just, difference when you see what is happening right now. Like Goma has been under siege like for one year before M23 took it. And at the same time there was a lot of mobilization, a lot of humanitarian sector booming in that city. But so far since the M23 has taken over, all, all this has disappeared. So there is less and less humanitarian intervention unfortunately.

The economic sectors also has weakened because now the banks are still closed in, in, in that region. But it's not the only one conflict at the east. There is also other conflicts which unfortunately we don't talk much about. At Ebuteli we try to make sure that we we talk about these ones.

It's also it's the ADF crisis, for example. But in the the north there is also another conflicts with other armed group including the CODECO which are also killing civilians as well. But if we, if you ... We insist like, on the ADF because it's longer than the M23 crisis. The CODECO has been there for years. The massacre against the civilian has been there for years. But the thing is they don't claim any territory, and they don't disturb in a c- in a certain sense the political architecture on the ground and and even nationally. So that's make them being not very a concern for the government, and that's that's probably the other thing when you speak about how the conflict is really affecting the civilians It's not the conflict that we are talking about more that is the one affecting much more the, the civilian.

The M23 crisis is serious, of course, it's real, but there is also other conflict that we should talk about and the, the other conflict that the government should take care of. But they they make their concern on M23 because there is a political gain in this crisis. You can have even without gaining the the war on the ground, you can gain the political discourse.

You can gain some political power, and that's what Fred was explaining, how everyone is using, is instrumentalizing this crisis for their own narrative. So that's really important to say. And then there is this divide which somehow it's also a territory divide, the r- the east and the west.

So, the fact that Goma is at 2,000 kilometers from Kinshasa it makes people not really feeling what is happening on the ground. You can have this insecurity in the discourse everywhere, but when you are in Kinshasa you can't even understand that we are in a city or in a country which is it is in a war. Because everything looks normal on the ground when you are in Kinshasa. But if you are at the east in Beni, in Kinshasa, in, in Goma, it's quite different. So I think that's also something we need to talk about. But then when it's come to the solution that has been so far tried you will see first of all, like, the Washington Accord unfortunately has not been implemented on the ground, because one of the step forward was supposed to be the ceasefire.

But so far the conflict is still ongoing. Clashes are still ongoing in North Kivu and South Kivu as well. And at the same time, there is this mechanism of evaluation and monitoring where the, the MONUSCO is also involved, but so far we are not seeing any any progress. At the same time, there is also the Doha process.

That's that, that's also there was some protocol signed, but as well they still sign a protocol about the ceasefire, but the ceasefire is not coming coming through. So that is really important to say that unfortunately these peace processes are also not really giving the successes on the ground.

And unfortunately there is no ceasefire so far.

O'HANLON: Thank you. And for those who follow this but not perhaps all that closely, let me just pick up and remind people based on what Reagan and Fred have just said, there is the Doha process. That involves the government of Congo and M23 primarily. There's the Washington process, President Trump and his efforts to get Rwanda and Congo to cooperate on some kind of a ceasefire, and then an economic development concept that the United States would also facilitate.

And the other angle there is to try to improve American access to critical materials and minerals and commodities in the broader global competition vis-à-vis China, as well as to help Congo and Rwanda economically. So it's meant to be a win-win-win, but it's not showing a lot of positive movement yet. And then finally, the Africa Union, the African Union efforts that have been in Luanda and Nairobi and have been designed to involve really the broader region. So just to remind folks, but unfortunately none of these are really showing a lot of traction, as Reagan just said.

And so here's my last question on the East before we move back to Kinshasa and presidential politics. What should we be doing? What should the world be trying to achieve here? What's a realistic mechanism?

And it looks to me as if none of these processes are acknowledging the basic realities of power. The basic reality of power in the East is that the M23 controls a lot of territory. The Congolese army doesn't have the ability to defeat it. The Rwandan government doesn't have an interest in pulling it back, and the UN mission is winding down.

And so there's really no group that's going to be in a position to push M23 out. And if I'm right about that is it more realistic perhaps to think of some kind of a pragmatic sort of power sharing? Fred and Reagan, you've said that in the East there is a certain amount of almost quasi-gover- governance by M23 in certain areas.

Should we try to sort of work with that, acknowledge that? You know, and let me just make one e- example or analogy and then put it back to you. In, in Iraq, a big problem over the years was that the Iranian government funded militias in Iraq that would then go off and carry out acts of violence or try to compete for political and economic spoils.

Over time, the Iraqi government had some success in bringing those Iranian backed militias, called Popular Mobilization Forces, under its control, and essentially putting them on the payroll and acknowledging that they needed to work with the Popular Mobilization Forces to control parts of Baghdad or other parts of the country.

And they gradually extended their influence over groups that had previously sort of been their enemy. Is there something like that we ought to be considering with the M23, where we try to acknowledge that they now have a place on the ground and get them to acknowledge that Kinshasa is sovereign, but M23 essor- essentially can be outsourced or asked in the short term to help control those areas?

Any other big idea? Because, you know, we've been talking about this war for so many years, and we talk about all these peace processes, but nothing really seems to make a difference. So what should we do? Sorry for the long-winded question and provocation, but Fred, back to you

BAUMA: I think there are some few things you can add to complex five and more, your description. So two things before we go to what we can do. One thing is that the M23 is an iteration of many other armed groups before that. So there is a cycle of violence that has been ongoing for 30 years, and M23 is just a new, a new iteration of that, made of former combatants of president group. And so there is a, a perception of impunity among many Congolese people, and most of those groups are supported by Rwanda or by Uganda. So that's an impunity and the justice question is very central to to, to this question.

The second one is the acknowledgment, and you say the reality of power and the acknowledgment that military-- there is no military solution to this conflict. According to some Congolese government officials, the, the Congolese government has spent so far 13 billion of dollars in, in this conflict. That's a lot of money for the Congolese national budget. And without proper results it didn't help stop M23, probably slow it down, mostly because of international pressure, but because... but not based on on capacity.

And there is also a, a sentiment that that Rwanda or Uganda or other countries in the region will continue to benefit for this insecurity in the long run. And as I said before, people on the ground are the only ones suffering. And I think this particularity of this conflict is it threatens the integrity of the country in the long run.

The idea of dividing Congo is becoming more and more present, and we should try to avoid that. So what can be done? I think one of the thing is the the coherence of the peace processes and of actors who are involved in the peace processes. I would say that the US involvement at the beginning of of last year was very positive in a way that it's for the first time, it allows both party of the conflict to sit on the sa- same table and to sign some paper.

Now my view is that the US which became over the year the main actor, the main international actor who have enough leverage to bring everybody to the table, has also merged many interests in this conflict between negotiating its access to critical mineral and trying to play other role. I think it's kind of, weakened more and more the position of the US and some actors like Rwanda or M23 are just waiting maybe for the administration to change or they want to shift in order to gain advantage. So we are... There's a risk for prolonging the conflict even more while actors are trying to manage some foreign powers.

So I think creating the coherence of peace processes is very important. Instead of spreading across processes, I think they should support one main process, internal process between belligerents and support the idea of an inclusive national dialogue, mainly because also some of the, the points that are discussed in Doha between the Congolese government and M23 are not points that should be resolved by only two belligerents, and they need more consensual position.

The second is to acknowledge the political dimension, the internal political dimension of this of this crisis. And I think it's worth it to remind that three of the, the key actors, es-especially on the Congolese side of this election, namely President Tshisekedi, Corneille Nangaa, and President Kabila, are also key, three of the key actors of the 2019 election.

So if we go back in time, and I think this is very unpopular position in Kinshasa the the rigged election of 2019 was, paved the, was the root of the stability that we see today in some, in, in part of it, I would say. And it's creating ground for future instability. And the, the attempts from the president to run again is, will only increase that.

And I'm not saying that Rwanda, and I start by, by posing the question of impunity because I'm not saying that Rwanda is not involved. In fact all this is possible because of military and logistical support of Rwanda, but it's also made possible because of internal issue that we are facing.

So those two have to be addressed at the same time. So pressure from-- so a coherent process instead of spreading it, a proper ceasefire imposed as we saw in the past, an inclusive process and a coordinated international pressure. For, for now, what we see is the US government is putting pressure on one direction. European countries are putting pressure having a different discourse. African Union is there waiting to see probably or even to to hope that it fails so its process can can start. So there is a lot of competition between those processes, and it doesn't and it does not help.

I also believe it's not in the interest of the Congolese government to maintain these conflicts for a long time. The longer the conflicts will last, the more it will be normalized and the more it will be difficult to bring the country together. And even if the political gain may be, may be scored in term of postponing election, in term of changing the constitution, I think the cost of it in term of unity of the country may be higher.

So in my view, it would be very important to resolve the conflicts the, the quickest possible and then try to rebuild what has to be rebuilt.

O'HANLON: Thank you, Fred. Reagan, anything you want to add on this same question?

MIVIRI: Yeah. Just probably two things. The first one is I really believe that the security part of this crisis is well linked to the political crisis. So probably we should just make sure that

the goal for the security part of it is just to make sure that we can have a ceasefire. That's the first thing.

And then when thinking about the future of these territories which are occupied now with M23, I think those discussion should be done in a broader forum. And I think the national dialogue is one of these, and I think it's maybe more consensual to have this discussion on the way forward in a much bigger forum. The second thing to add is that I really believe as well that we need to take advantage of the fact that there is this willingness and this mobilization of, of the, the population on the ground.

We've seen this in, in the last protests. We've seen this even in cities which are occupied or which which are under insecurity. And we need to make sure that the citizen are participating in this process and we, and to, to push leaders to, to have this discussion and in more, more consensual. And that what... that's happened, and that's actually succeeded in 25 years ago.

So I think we are in a situation again like in, in 2000s where there was this discussion in Sun City and there were different fraction. And at the end of the day, there was a lot of mobilization coming from across the country but also from abroad, which helps to have this.

So, so far we need also to include like, people like European Union, people who are... had a certain historical memory, institutional memory of these peace processes, which can help in their own capacity. Because of course, the willingness of the the USA is really important, but they need also to be supported by other people who knows other people as well on the ground.

O'HANLON: That's great. Let me ask a clarifying question, and then I want to move on one more time to... Well, we're actually moving towards the presidential election question as we have this conversation. But let me put the question to you this way, Fred, and then Reagan, you may want to comment as well.

Fred, don't we need at least two peace processes as I listen to your arguments? Because we need one for the broader region involving Rwanda, Uganda, maybe Angola, and anybody who wants to work on common economic development and has an interest in that. But the national dialogue that you're talking about involving the Congolese government, President Tshisekedi, other key political actors in Congo, potential future presidential candidates or past candidates I don't quite understand why Rwanda should be part of that dialogue or any other outside country, unless they're just playing the role of facilitator or bringing their good offices to bear.

Because it seems to me that's more of a conversation for the Congolese people and politicians to have themselves, and Rwanda really has no business deciding who should be president in Congo, just like Congo has no business telling President Kagame whether he should stop running for office every time there's a new election in Rwanda.

So don't you sort of need two peace processes, one involving the broader region as well as the EU and the United States and and interested parties, and the other really just among the Congolese people? That's my question.

BAUMA: Absolutely. Rwanda doesn't have, Rwanda does not have a place or a seat in any Congolese Congolese dialogue. That has to be clear. Usually Congo, at least in the last twenty years, hasn't been involved in any internal politics in Rwanda. And so Rwanda should not also be involved in any internal politics in DRC. But the need of a dialogue between

Congolese is still important, and I think this has to be to happen before conflict imposes such a dialogue.

So the, that dialogue has to be between Congolese people from the majority, the opposition those who hold guns, people in the diaspora, everybody to sit together and really to understand why we are here and how do we get out of here. But it also requires a willingness not to create a process of... that will create new opportunistic agents, but focus on rebuilding a country and ending this conflict and preventing future conflicts. So how people should live together and focus on prosperity of the nation. That I think should be a process that the Catholic and Protestant Church has been trying to push for, but also countries like Angola and other we're trying to facilitate. I think the role of international actors in this process should be somewhere between .. guarantors of the process or political, providing political support and maybe pushing political pressure to a different group of actors that has to be involved.

Now, on the regional side, and I think there is a, a major regional aspect to this conflict between Congo and Rwanda, but also the role of Burundi and the role of Uganda has to be called into question. Some of that question is economic and I think that's what the regional economic integration framework has, has tried to address, even though it's limited to Congo and Rwanda, but I think it should be expanded to Burundi and DRC. And to make sure that the the the fraudulent, the illicit economy in the region, we create conditions for illicit economy and share prosperity, which should not be to the expense of Congolese people and Congolese resources.

That process can be, I think the Washington process was had good base for such a, for such process. But again limiting it to Congo and Rwanda is just a theoretical view of-- that has nothing to do with the reality on the ground, where more than the two countries are involved in this, in this country.

And that can help maybe prevent foreign interference in conflicts in DRC and result in creating condition for a stable region. And this will be in favor of of population in DRC, in Rwanda, in Uganda, and in Burundi, which I'm sure they are all tired of of the war narrative.

O'HANLON: Thank you. And Reagan, I'm gonna put the same question to you, but let me weave in a question we got from the audience as well, which is trying to be a little bit more specific about understanding what a national dialogue could actually try to achieve. So we all would welcome a spirit of cooperation, but what kind of specific outcomes would you look for if there were to be this kind of a national dialogue?

Is it primarily about recommitting President Tshisekedi to the two-term limit and making sure that he respects the constitution as it previously existed? Is it reopening that question of term limits for the president and considering whether DRC could go the way that Rwanda and Uganda have done with almost the possibility of presidents for life?

Or is it more about how you structure the parliament, how you structure the federal government versus the provincial governments? What would be the real goals, the real issues that a national dialogue could try to address, and what would be the outcomes that you might recommend?

MIVIRI: Yeah, yeah. Before responding to that, probably just a quick historical reminder that before the the Sun City process in in the, in South Africa for DRC, we had this agreement between DRC and Rwanda and then between DRC and Uganda. So it's important to have a

separate regional agreements. And so far we have, we have already this agreement with Rwanda at Washington, but now the, there is a need of implementation. I think we need to have this the same type of agreements with Burundi and with Uganda as well. But then after that, I think the rest of questions should be in this national dialogue.

So now this national dialogue should achieve mostly the national cohesion because I think that the big the big issue here. Because, the, the national cohesion can help us to bring again the unity of the country. Because now we almost have like a two countries in, in one. The M23 is controlling this region. They have their own administration. At the same time, you have the administration in Kinshasa. So you need to have this national cohesion.

And then on technical question like okay, are we going for a third term? I think that is a no because that's one of the question that is dividing people. So if you, if one of, one of the way of building the confidence and the trust between people is the president to say it loudly and clearly that he's not going for a third term because he knows that this is really something which is a no-go zone in the constitution. And we've seen this with Kabila the last time in 2016 until 2018. This is was almost exploding the the country because of this question again. So I think that is a no-go zone, and after that then we can, the thing that we can discuss is, when do we have the election? How do we want this election to to happen?

Because unfortunately now we have a, we are we are late when it's come to the, the electoral calendar. Probably it can be pushed in a certain way, but I think it's mostly about the national cohesion. And with that national cohesion, we can think about as well question of what are we supposed to do about what is given as root causes of this conflict in the east, but how also do we strengthen the national infrastructure, like the army, the police, so that people can be protected, because that's also the other issue.

If this conflict has been coming every time, it's because the country is not able to protect itself. Because of course the question that's raised by M23 could be discussed like in the parliament or in other forum, but at the same time, there is no need to come and to kill people, and that could be can only be prevented if you have an army which can protect the integrity of the country and you have a police which can protect the civilian on day by day basis.

O'HANLON: Let me ask on that question, is the international community doing enough to help Congo right now? I don't want to imply that we have all the answers in the United States or in the European Union or anywhere else. But of course, right now what we've seen is a UN force that has not been very effective and is gradually withdrawing.

It's sort of withdrawing on a prolonged delayed schedule, but no one really expects very much of it. It's just a question of how will that withdrawal do the least damage. That's at least how I look at it. The United States has a very minimal role in Congo in terms of security. We don't really deploy any substantial number of military trainers or any special forces groups to help the Congolese military get stronger and potentially be able to control the east more effectively itself.

I don't know of any major European security assistance programs that are ongoing. I could be wrong. But should the world be trying to do more? Should the Congolese government be open to more help from the outside to strengthen its own military and police, or is this really just a job for the Congolese?

Reagan, maybe I'll start with you and then go back to Fred.

MIVIRI: Yeah. Probably not doing more, but knowing, doing better. Because like for example, what we are seeing with the Washington Accord and the support from the US, it seem like it's a, a support to a regime, but it's not a support to a country.

So it's, it need to be structural, it need to come in a way of strengthening a country, a state, not strengthening a regime. Because that's what Western countries has been doing in the, in the past years unfortunately, and mainly at the time of the Cold War, they were supporting someone like Mobutu and and they were supporting a regime, and after him, it was the collapse of the country because the, there wasn't structures.

So I think it's really important to put the money, to put the influence where it's needed, and that means structures, make sure that we have strong institution, but not str- strong people. And I think for that there is a need for for support economically, but also politically. But at, at the same time, it's not like, it's not handout. It's it's beneficial. It's mutual beneficial. Because if you strengthen like the economy of DRC, then even the supply chain for minerals, it will be also sustainable for you as well. So I think it's mostly about make sure that we have strong institution, state that is functioning and which can be also accountable for for the people.

O'HANLON: That's a great answer. And it also, by the way, builds on something my colleague Alex Noyes has recently written about. He did a major study with a colleague on security assistance, and he basically emphasized the same point you did, that building the institutions is the most important thing before worrying about the weapons transfers, and also separate from the political regime that may be in power at a given time.

Fred, I wanted to ask if you had any comments on that same question?

BAUMA: Yeah, I agree with for what Reagan said. One thing that I can add is that to your question, if the international community is doing enough, I think the, the situation in the Great Lake in general we are victim of the transactionalism of our time, if I can say so. So there is in this event for international actors who are trying to combine both their immediate interests in term of accessing to critical minerals or or securing illegal traffic of minerals for some and the the prospect of long-term investment in stabilizing the country and putting it back on track and so on.

And there is, and this meets opportunism of of nat- national actors, both in the governments and in in the conflict area. So the, the result of these two is a, a status quo in in, in some sort. So I agree with Reagan that focusing on reinforcing the institutions creating professional military and security service should be one of the key thing to avoid future conflicts.

But I also it should be important for international actors to understand that the the economic prosperity of the of Congo and all the conflict, all the strategic investment in mineral area and so on lies in political stability of DRC. And the political stability of DRC It's connecting to maintaining or encouraging democratic prosperity, democratic change in in, in the country.

If international actors become tolerant to the idea that we will install a new authoritarian government in Kinshasa, that tends to only give a narrative to whoever want to use violence as a way of fighting. Because the most important gain, I think, of the, of the peace processes in the '20s, was to shift the politics from violence to a normal political life through election. And so Congo should preserve that way of conducting politics and reinforce it and stabilizing it instead of trying to copy a reality of some of our neighbors.

Because that is also something we hear in the discourse. Congo is-- seems to be an exception in the in Central African region. And I think it's a positive exception of the of normalizing the idea that we should compete for election, and every five, ten years, we should allow democratic change and the stability of institutions should be based on, on, on that that, that principle. So we have a lot to gain as Congolese, and I think international community has also a lot to gain in preserving that rather than abandoning it for short-term economic interests.

O'HANLON: Well, we're down to our last four minutes, and so what I'd like to do is give you each a chance to wrap up, starting with Fred. But there are two specific questions that I hope at least maybe one of-- one question for each of you, you can weave in if you wish. One comes from the audience, and it has to do with the FDLR, the Front Démocratique pour la Libération du Rwanda, and its role in the ongoing conflict and whether there's any... and its idea for a demobilization plan for militias. We haven't explicitly mentioned the FDLR. I don't think it's as crucial of a player as it once was in this conflict, but it still is obviously there, and so there's that question.

My question that I would add is, if you were gonna advise President Trump on what the United States should do next, what would you say? Because Fred, I think you said something complimentary about President Trump's role. It might not have been successful yet, but at least it was well-intentioned, and it did point towards a path that could be of mutual benefit to all countries, the United States with its need for critical minerals and its need to compete with China in that domain, Rwanda with its economic interests and its security interests in Eastern Congo, and obviously the DRC government and people.

So if there's one tool the United States could use, we've been talking about security assistance and trying to target the institutions of the DRC military, so that's one piece of it. But is there anything else the United States could do at this juncture? Should it put more pressure on Rwanda to rein in the M23? I think that was a, a recommendation in our forum last year. Should it put more pressure on President Tshisekedi to have the national dialogue and agree to respect term limits?

Or should it now use some of these new mechanisms that we've got for economic development? Well, they're not new, but they've been empowered. The Development Finance Corporation, by the way, where my colleague Landry Signe had an event at Brookings last week talking about DFC and its ability now to make much bigger loans across Africa and the developing world in general to try to expedite mutually beneficial economic development.

What's the best next step for the United States? Fred, over to you please for that and any other concluding comments.

BAUMA: I think one of the clear next step for the US is to understand that stability is a very important factor in in a promote, in promoting investment, including US investment. And stability in DRC is lying in the idea of stabilizing political institutions, and so preserving the current constitution, ensuring free political process, and promoting stability through national cohesion dialogue is actually not only a rhetoric of democracy, it's very key to attracting investors and creating condition for economic prosperity.

And we can see it in a way because since the signature of the strategic partnership agreement, Congo hasn't been able to attract many US investors. In fact, I think there is probably two or three company only that commit to, to invest in DRC. And I think political instability will only make it worse. So there is a clear correlation between the two.

The second thing is I still believe sanctions are very useful and sanction against Rwanda were useful in that. But sanction is a political tool, and that tool has to come in support of a process. So sanction alone is not a solution. And we can sanction everybody in, within the M23, I think at this time almost all of them are sanctioned or in the Rwandan government. But if sanction is not supporting a political process, it's doesn't really feel any, there will be no gain. And at some point I believe there should be pressure on, on, on the other side as well. So creating condition for a inclusive process through all mechanism should be also a priority.

And the last thing, the Congo and the US are in the security MoU which has not been released. And I still believe investing in in our security infrastructure, in, in our security forces is a key right? It should be a key priority for the Congolese army. The Congolese government in the recent years has spent a lot of money in, in defense but most of that is on equipment and paying mercenaries and other, but not reinforcing genuinely the the army. And I think helping the government to develop a professional army and a professional police is a key point in stabilizing the country in the long run.

O'HANLON: Thank you, Fred. Reagan, over to you for your final thoughts.

MIVIRI: Yes. Probably I will respond first to the FDRL question. Yes, FDRL is still a, an issue in DRC, probably not because it's an excuse from Rwanda, but mostly because it's still also a group which is involved in incidents in DRC against Congolese. So I think that is the reason to deal about this this group and other groups actually. There was Lendo, the ADF. All these group need to be deal with and and probably DRC need also support coming from international world community with intelligence and also other support to make sure that we have finally a end of of these armed groups in eastern Congo.

And my, my last comments it will be to say that I think there's still hope in DRC, and I think we need to to help and to support processes which are ongoing. But we need also to make sure that the protection of civilian is core in all these discussions. Thank you.

O'HANLON: Thank you very much. You're both brilliant. You're both brave and committed Congolese; we stand in solidarity with you. Thank you for your contributions today and all you're doing, and we certainly wish the people of Congo and the region well as they try to reach the next steps in peace, stability, democratic strengthening, and prosperity.

So signing off from Brookings, thank you very much for being part of this today, and best wishes to everyone.