Cooperação Militar Entre Moçambique E O Ruanda Como Resposta À Insurgência Em Cabo Delgado (2021 A 2025)

Hélio Mesa[1] , Sidney Lobo[2]

PhD candidate in Ciência Política e Relações Internacionais, Universidade Católica de Moçambique

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000440

Received: 18 October 2026; Accepted: 27 October 2026; Published: 04 November 2026

ABSTRACT

This article analyses military cooperation between Mozambique and Rwanda from 2021 to 2025, with the aim of assessing the extent to which it functioned as a mechanism for responding to the insurgency in Cabo Delgado. The study follows a qualitative single-case design that combines directed content analysis with chronological process reconstruction. A documentary corpus of 18 documents (monitoring reports, official statements, policy studies, a civil-society bulletin and press articles), selected through an explicit search, screening and inclusion protocol, was coded against four analytical categories and read alongside 12 academic studies; key factual claims were cross-checked against primary official sources. The evidence indicates that the Rwandan intervention contributed decisively to the recapture of Mocímboa da Praia in 2021, protected the gas enclave and was associated with very few recorded events of violence against civilians, in contrast with Mozambican forces. However, the insurgents dispersed, violence on the N380 corridor rose in 2024 and reached Niassa in 2025, and the legal and financial framework of the cooperation remained opaque. The cooperation was effective as containment but insufficient to stabilise the province. The article proposes the concept of delegated containment, distinguished from proxy warfare, surrogate warfare and security force assistance, to describe security that is obtained from an external partner but not incorporated into national institutions.

Keywords: Military Cooperation; Insurgency; Cabo Delgado; Rwanda; Regional Security;

Resumo

O artigo analisa a cooperação militar entre Moçambique e o Ruanda entre 2021 e 2025, com o objectivo de avaliar em que medida funcionou como mecanismo de resposta à insurgência em Cabo Delgado. O estudo segue um desenho qualitativo de estudo de caso único, que combina análise de conteúdo dirigida e reconstituição cronológica do processo. Um conjunto de 18 documentos (relatórios de monitoria, comunicados oficiais, estudos de política, um boletim da sociedade civil e peças de imprensa), seleccionados através de um protocolo explícito de pesquisa, triagem e inclusão, foi codificado segundo quatro categorias analíticas e lido à luz de 12 estudos académicos; as principais afirmações factuais foram confrontadas com fontes oficiais primárias. A evidência indica que a intervenção ruandesa contribuiu de forma decisiva para a recuperação de Mocímboa da Praia em 2021, protegeu o enclave do gás e esteve associada a muito poucos eventos registados de violência contra civis, ao contrário das forças moçambicanas. Contudo, os insurgentes dispersaram, a violência no corredor da N380 aumentou em 2024 e chegou ao Niassa em 2025, e o enquadramento jurídico e financeiro da cooperação permaneceu opaco. A cooperação foi eficaz na contenção, mas insuficiente para estabilizar a província. O artigo propõe o conceito de contenção delegada, distinto da guerra por procuração, da guerra substituta e da assistência às forças de segurança, para descrever a segurança obtida de um parceiro externo mas não incorporada nas instituições nacionais.

Palavras-chave: Cooperação Militar; Insurgência; Cabo Delgado; Ruanda; Segurança Regional;

INTRODUCTION

This article examines military cooperation between Mozambique and Rwanda as a mechanism for responding to the insurgency in Cabo Delgado between 2021 and 2025. The aim is to assess the extent to which this cooperation contained armed violence and created conditions for lasting stabilisation in the province, distinguishing the immediate military gains from the political, institutional and humanitarian effects that resulted from them.

To understand the importance of this cooperation, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of the conflict. According to Habibe *et al.* (2019), the violence began in October 2017 with attacks on police posts in Mocímboa da Praia by a group whose local roots dated back several years. Since then, the human cost has continued to rise: by July 2025, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project [ACLED] (2025b) had recorded 6,122 reported deaths linked to political violence in the province, 2,531 of them civilians.

In April 2021, the deteriorating security situation led TotalEnergies to withdraw all personnel from the Mozambique LNG project on the Afungi peninsula and to declare force majeure (TotalEnergies, 2021). It was in this context that, on 9 July of the same year, around one thousand members of the Rwandan armed forces and police began arriving in Cabo Delgado at the request of President Filipe Nyusi.

From that moment on, the Rwandan presence became the backbone of the military response. According to Massango (2024) and Moztimes (2025), this presence continued after the withdrawal of the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) in July 2024 and outlasted the change of government in 2025. Despite this centrality, the literature has focused more on the causes of the insurgency than on the instruments used to combat it. Carneiro de Sousa (2025), in a survey of 35 indexed articles on the conflict, concluded precisely that the topic still calls for further research.

In Portuguese-language studies this gap is evident: Njelezi (2023) treats Rwanda as part of the military apparatus and Langa (2024) sees its presence as a sign of the internationalisation of the conflict, but neither makes the cooperation the central object of analysis. What is missing, therefore, is an assessment that brings together, within a single framework, the military performance, the protection of civilians and the legal and financial sustainability of the cooperation.

Hence the research question: **To what extent did military cooperation between Mozambique and Rwanda, between 2021 and 2025, function as an effective mechanism for responding to the insurgency in Cabo Delgado?**

To answer this question, the study sought to (i) chronologically reconstruct the genesis and evolution of the cooperation; (ii) analyse its operational results and its impact on the protection of civilians; (iii) examine the legal framework, the financing and the interests involved; and (iv) identify measures suited to the results obtained.

This article argues that the cooperation with Rwanda was effective as an instrument of military containment and of protection of strategic assets, but not as a mechanism for resolving the conflict. It further advances, as an interpretation to be examined against the evidence rather than as an established causal claim, that the absence of a transparent legal and financial framework and of a plan to transfer capabilities to the national forces limited the cooperation's contribution to stabilisation. Put simply, the country gained time but did not convert that time into stabilisation.

The topic is relevant to Political Science and International Relations because it concerns a bilateral intervention outside the frameworks of the African Union and SADC, which involves the partial delegation of a sovereign function and exposes the weaknesses of the Southern African security architecture. Moreover, the study was conceived from an accountability perspective, which explains the attention given to financing and transparency. To prevent this perspective from carrying excessive weight, the interpretations were checked against sources of different kinds.

As for its organisation, the article is structured in six sections. After this introduction, the second section presents the theoretical framework, the analytical model and the concept of delegated containment. The third describes the research design, the document selection protocol, the coding procedure and the indicators used. The fourth presents and analyses the results, following the phases of the cooperation. The fifth discusses these results in light of the literature, distinguishing established findings from interpretations, and, finally, the sixth sets out the conclusions, organised around the objectives and the thesis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Nature and Causes of the Conflict

Brasil (2023) opens the debate with the question of naming: the conflict in Cabo Delgado combines elements of insurgency and terrorism, and the choice of term shapes the policies adopted. Along the same lines, Langa (2024) speaks of violent extremism and terrorism, but adds the dispute over natural resources and the internationalisation of the conflict. Bonate (2022), in turn, sees transnational jihadism as an ideology that appropriates local grievances against the State.

By contrast, Habibe *et al.* (2019) place the emphasis on internal factors and show that radicalisation in Mocímboa da Praia can only be explained by a combination of historical, social, political, economic and religious factors. Cambrão and Julião (2022) reinforce this reading by attributing the war primarily to poverty, the unequal distribution of resources and social exclusion. Feijó (2021) adds a decisive point: the insurgents recruit by exploiting feelings of social injustice, and not merely by force.

Beneath the disagreement over naming there is, therefore, a point of agreement, since even the authors who give greater weight to ideology acknowledge that the insurgency feeds on local grievances. The study aligns itself with this convergence and uses the term insurgency, as it better describes a conflict with a social base and territorial presence, without denying the use of terrorist methods. This leads to a consequence that guides the entire article: if the conflict has internal roots, a military response, however competent, acts on the manifestation of the problem and not on its cause. Thus, assessing the cooperation with Rwanda solely in terms of the territory recovered would mean measuring the most visible part of the task and leaving out the most difficult one.

Regional Security and Military Cooperation

Drawing on regional security complex theory, Schutz (2016) argues that the security problems of Southern African states are so interconnected that they cannot be addressed separately, and that the region was moving, albeit in embryonic form, towards a security community centred on SADC. Cabo Delgado puts this expectation to the test, since Rwanda, which is not a member of SADC, ended up becoming the main security provider in one of its member states.

Donelli (2022) helps to explain this choice through Kigali's military diplomacy, which seeks to present the country as a security provider beyond the Great Lakes, to compensate for its lack of natural resources and to reduce criticism of the regime. The same author acknowledges that Rwandan forces may act as a proxy force for European interests, provided these coincide with those of Kigali (Donelli, 2022, p. 25). In this context, Langa (2024, p. 117) agrees on the motivations but reads the same presence as a sign of internationalisation that carries costs for Mozambican sovereignty. Shield (2023), in turn, shifts attention to performance and attributes Rwandan effectiveness to institutional factors built within Rwanda itself, doubting that this capability can easily be transferred to the Mozambican forces.

This doubt finds an echo in the Mozambican literature: Njelezi (2023, p. 66) proposes an integrated strategy in which Rwandan and SADC forces support the Defence and Security Forces (FDS) in intelligence, logistics, health and training, that is, a supporting rather than a substitute role. Franco and Ajú (2022) reach a similar conclusion from the experiences of Somalia and Mali, showing that stabilisation fails when the military component is not accompanied by a political and social response.

Combining these readings gives rise to the analytical model adopted. Military cooperation only functions as a response mechanism if it operates across three dimensions: operational effectiveness, that is, the capacity to recover and hold territory; the protection of civilians, which underpins the legitimacy of the intervention; and institutional sustainability, which includes the legal framework, predictable financing and the transfer of capabilities to the national forces. These three dimensions, together with the genesis of the cooperation, form the four analytical categories used in the coding (Section 3.3).

Delegated Containment: Definition and Theoretical Contribution

When only the first of these dimensions is present, the study proposes the term delegated containment. It designates a configuration of security cooperation with three cumulative features: (i) a host state invites the regular forces of a foreign state to carry out coercive tasks on its territory; (ii) the external force achieves containment, understood as recapturing and protecting priority areas and reducing the insurgents' capacity to hold territory, without defeating them; and (iii) the host state does not incorporate the resulting security gains into its own institutions, whether through capability transfer, parliamentary oversight or predictable financing. The concept is defined by this combination of external coercive effectiveness and weak domestic institutionalisation, not by the mere presence of a foreign force.

The concept differs from neighbouring notions in the literature. In proxy arrangements and in the delegation of war to rebel organisations, a sponsor uses a local agent to pursue its own objectives at arm's length (Salehyan, 2010); in Cabo Delgado the relationship runs the other way, since it is the host state that delegates coercion to a foreign state's regular army operating directly on the ground. Surrogate warfare, as theorised by Krieg and Rickli (2019), describes a patron that externalises the burden of war to human or technological surrogates; delegated containment focuses instead on the client state that outsources the burden and on the institutional consequences of doing so. Security force assistance seeks to make partner forces more effective through training and advising, and its limited military utility when the interests of provider and recipient diverge is well documented (Biddle *et al.*, 2018); in the Mozambican case, by contrast, the external force largely substituted for, rather than trained, the national forces. Finally, unlike private military contracting, the external actor is a sovereign state with its own diplomatic and economic interests (Donelli, 2022).

The contribution of the concept is twofold. Analytically, it separates two questions that the literature on Cabo Delgado tends to merge: whether the external force is effective, and whether the host state converts that effectiveness into durable institutional capacity. Empirically, it generates observable implications that can be checked against the documentary record: high operational effectiveness and low civilian harm attributable to the external force; persistence or displacement of violence outside the areas it protects; no convergence of the national forces' conduct towards the partner's standard; and weak legal and financial institutionalisation. The concept was used as a working proposition to be tested, not as a foregone conclusion, and Section 5 indicates which of these implications are supported by established evidence and which remain interpretive.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Scope

To test this model, the study followed a qualitative approach in the form of a single case study. The unit of analysis is the bilateral military cooperation relationship between Mozambique and Rwanda, delimited to Cabo Delgado and to the period between July 2021 and December 2025. The background from 2017 to 2021 serves only as context. Sources published after December 2025 were used only to document or verify events that occurred within the period (for example, a corporate press release of January 2026 on a decision taken in November 2025) or, where explicitly indicated, as post-period context.

Search Strategy, Selection Criteria and Corpus

Data collection was exclusively documentary and took place in October 2026. The search covered Google

Scholar, SciELO, Redalyc and RCAAP, as well as the websites of institutions that produce information on the conflict: the Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos (IESE), the Observatório do Meio Rural (OMR), the Centro para Democracia e Direitos Humanos (CDD), ACLED, the International Organization for Migration, the International Crisis Group and the Council of the European Union. Searches combined the terms "Cabo Delgado", "Rwanda"/"Ruanda", "Mozambique"/"Moçambique", "military cooperation"/"cooperação militar", "Rwanda Defence Force", "SAMIM", "status of forces agreement", "European Peace Facility" and "Mozambique LNG", in English and Portuguese.

Selection followed three stages: (1) screening of titles and summaries for relevance to the Mozambique–Rwanda cooperation or to the evolution of violence in Cabo Delgado; (2) full-text reading of the remaining documents; and (3) application of explicit criteria. Documents were included if they (a) had identifiable personal or institutional authorship; (b) carried an explicit date; (c) referred directly to the cooperation, to the operations of Rwandan forces, or to violence, displacement, legal instruments or financing in Cabo Delgado between July 2021 and December 2025; and (d) were publicly accessible. Documents were excluded if they (e) were undated; (f) were anonymous, including social media posts; (g) reported facts that could not be confirmed in at least one other independent source; or (h) duplicated the content of a document already included, in which case the original source was retained.

This process yielded a documentary corpus of 18 documents, listed in Table 1, which were read in light of 12 academic studies used for theoretical and interpretive purposes. In addition, three primary sources were consulted solely to verify specific legal facts: the Rwandan Ministry of Justice's announcement of the 2022 agreements (Ministry of Justice of Rwanda, 2022) and the reports of the Agência de Informação de Moçambique on the parliamentary ratification of 2024 and on the signing of the status of forces agreement in 2025 ("Frelimo majority vote", 2024; "Moçambique e Ruanda reafirmam compromisso", 2025).

Table 1. Documentary corpus by type, use and analytical categories

Document type (n)	Documents	Categories coded	Role in the analysis
Conflict monitoring and analysis reports (5)	ICG (2022); ACLED (2025a, 2025b); Bofin (2025); IOM (2024)	OE, PC, IS	Main source of quantitative indicators on violence and displacement
Official statements (4)	Council of the European Union (2022, 2024); TotalEnergies (2021, 2026)	IS, G	Primary evidence on financing and on the gas project
Policy studies (3)	Alden and Chichava (2021); Chichava (2022); Donelli (2022)	G, OE, IS	Context, motivations and interests
Civil society bulletin (1)	CDD (2025)	IS	Legal instruments and payments
Press articles (5)	"Filipe Nyusi confirma presença" (2021); "Mozambican and Rwandan forces capture" (2021); "Ruanda alarga apoio militar" (2023); Massango (2024); Moztimes (2025)	G, OE, IS	Dating of events; corroboration

Source: Authors (2026). Categories: G = genesis of the cooperation; OE = operational effectiveness; PC = protection of civilians; IS = institutional sustainability.

Coding Procedure and Treatment of Conflicting Evidence

The analysis combined directed content analysis with chronological process reconstruction. The coding frame was defined *a priori* from the analytical model (Section 2.3) and comprised four categories, each with indicators: genesis of the cooperation (decision, actors involved, legal form and timing of the deployment); operational effectiveness (territory recaptured and held, engagements, insurgent activity and its geographical spread); protection of civilians (events of violence against civilians by actor, civilian fatalities, displacement

and returns); and institutional sustainability (legal instruments, their signature, ratification and publication, sources and predictability of financing, transparency, and evidence of capability transfer). Each document was read in full, and the passages relevant to the research question were coded into one or more categories in a coding matrix that recorded the document, the passage, the category, the date of the event described and the type of source. The chronological reconstruction then ordered the coded events to identify the phases of the cooperation (Table 2).

Conflicting evidence was treated through explicit rules. For legal and financial facts (dates of signature, ratification and amounts approved), official primary sources took precedence. For quantitative indicators of violence and displacement, systematic datasets (ACLED and IOM) took precedence over press reports. A claim was treated as established when it was supported by a primary source or by at least two independent sources; otherwise, it was reported as an attributed claim, naming its source.

When sources diverged, for example on troop numbers or costs, both values were reported side by side rather than choosing the most convenient figure. Cross-checking against primary sources also led to the correction of one date reported in the press: the status of forces agreement was signed on 27 August 2025, as documented by the Mozambican news agency, and not on the date of the article that reported it.

Indicators, Definitions and Their Limitations

The quantitative indicators used have specific definitions and limitations. ACLED records political violence events from media, local partner and other reported sources (Raleigh *et al.*, 2010). An event of violence against civilians is a deliberate violent act by an organised armed actor against unarmed non-combatants. The proportions cited for the FADM and the police refer to the share of each actor's recorded events in Cabo Delgado that fall into this category, calculated annually since 2018, and the count for Rwandan forces refers to the period from July 2021 to early 2025 (Bofin, 2025).

Reported fatalities are estimates, generally conservative, and events in areas of restricted access may be under-reported. Low counts for Rwandan forces also partly reflect lower exposure, since those forces operated in fewer districts and engagements. The displacement figures come from round 21 of the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, which covers Cabo Delgado, Nampula and Niassa, with data collected between 15 May and 15 June 2024, and they refer to cumulative displacement since 2017 (IOM, 2024). The cost figures are estimates reported by ACLED and the CDD, not official accounts.

Causal Inference, Validity and Limitations

The chronological reconstruction establishes sequence and co-occurrence, not causation. Where changes in violence follow moments in the cooperation, the article describes them as consistent with, and not caused by, the cooperation, and it considers alternative explanations explicitly: SAMIM's parallel deployment, the departure of foreign fighters, the insurgents' strategic adaptation and the socio-economic drivers of the conflict. The generalisation sought is analytical, through the concept of delegated containment, and not statistical.

This design has further limitations that should be acknowledged. There was no fieldwork and there were no interviews, so the evidence depends on what was documented and published. The text of the 2021 agreement was never published, and that of the 2025 status of forces agreement is known only through the press. As it did not involve human participants, the study did not require informed consent; all the documents used are publicly available.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

Based on the procedures described, Table 2 organises the cooperation into four phases, which serve as the common thread for the following sections.

Table 2. Phases of military cooperation between Mozambique and Rwanda (2021 to 2025)

Date	Event	Source
Phase 1. Intervention and rapid gains (2021)		
9 Jul. 2021	Around one thousand Rwandan personnel (700 soldiers and 300 police officers) arrive on the Afungi peninsula	"Filipe Nyusi confirma presença" (2021); ICG (2022)
Jul. 2021	SAMIM begins its mission	Massango (2024)
8 Aug. 2021	Recapture of Mocímboa da Praia	"Mozambican and Rwandan forces capture" (2021)
Dec. 2021	The Rwandan contingent reaches 2,500 personnel	ICG (2022)
Phase 2. Consolidation and first instruments (2022 and 2023)		
Jun. 2022	Agreements on extradition and on mutual legal assistance in criminal matters	Ministry of Justice of Rwanda (2022); CDD (2025)
1 Dec. 2022	The European Union approves EUR 20 million for the Rwandan force	Council of the European Union (2022)
21 Dec. 2022	Rwandan operation in Ancuabe district	"Ruanda alarga apoio militar" (2023)
Phase 3. Replacement of the regional force (2024)		
Mar. 2024	The Assembleia da República (Parliament) ratifies the 2022 agreements	"Frelimo majority vote" (2024); CDD (2025)
May 2024	The Rwandan contingent reaches around 4,000 personnel	Bofin (2025)
Jul. 2024	Formal closure of SAMIM	Massango (2024)
Aug. 2024	Mozambique suspends payments to the Rwandan force	ACLED (2025b); CDD (2025)
18 Nov. 2024	New European support of EUR 20 million	Council of the European Union (2024)
Phase 4. Late formalisation and return of gas (2025)		
Apr. and May 2025	Insurgent incursion into Niassa; three Rwandan soldiers killed in Mocímboa da Praia	ACLED (2025a)
27 Aug. 2025	Signing of the status of forces agreement in Kigali	"Moçambique e Ruanda reafirmam compromisso" (2025); Moztimes (2025)
7 Nov. 2025	Lifting of force majeure on the Mozambique LNG project	TotalEnergies (2026)

Source: Authors (2026)

Reading the table reveals a clear pattern. The first six months of the cooperation concentrated the military gains; from 2022 onwards, the milestones became mainly legal and financial, and they came late. European support arrived seventeen months after the first deployment, and the status of forces agreement more than four years later. In practice, the cooperation operated first and only afterwards sought the rules to sustain it.

Genesis of the Cooperation

Alden and Chichava (2021, p. 6) observed in May 2021 that Nyusi's preference seemed to be to avoid, or at least severely limit, any international involvement, whether by SADC or by other actors. Two months later, however, Mozambique was receiving foreign troops. The apparent contradiction disappears when one considers the form chosen: according to the ICG (2022), the Rwandan troops arrived under a bilateral arrangement, landed on the Afungi peninsula and, in the initial contingent, numbered around 700 soldiers and 300 police officers, while SAMIM deployed in the same month under a regional mandate.

This sequence supports an interpretation that the documents suggest but cannot confirm: rather than abandoning its reluctance towards external intervention, the Government chose the format that best

preserved it. A bilateral partner, with no multilateral mandate and no parliamentary debate, allowed the Presidency to decide who intervened, where and on what terms.

The troops' first destination is consistent with this interpretation. Afungi was the site of the gas project, and Bonate *et al.* (2024, p. 6) note that the security cordon set up around Palma may have served to convince TotalEnergies that conditions existed for its return. Protecting the economic enclave was therefore among the priorities from day one.

4.2 Operational results and protection of civilians

Once on the ground, the Rwandan troops produced rapid gains. On 8 August 2021, Mozambican and Rwandan forces recaptured Mocímboa da Praia, which had been held by the insurgents for about a year ("Mozambican and Rwandan forces capture", 2021). Bonate *et al.* (2024, p. 6) consider the intervention decisive in reversing the course of the war and refer to the expulsion of the insurgents from their bases in the Messalo region. By December 2021, the Rwandan contingent already numbered 2,500 personnel (ICG, 2022).

Beyond territory, there is a less frequently cited and perhaps more revealing piece of evidence concerning civilians. According to Bofin (2025), ACLED recorded just two events of violence against civilians attributed to the Rwandan forces in roughly three and a half years of deployment (July 2021 to early 2025), whereas between 8% and 21% of the recorded violence involving the Mozambique Armed Defence Forces (FADM) in Cabo Delgado targeted civilians each year since 2018, and up to 50% of that involving the police. In 2025, ACLED also attributed to the FADM 110 civilian deaths at sea since 2020, mostly fishermen (ACLED, 2025b). These figures must be read with caution: they are based on reported events, the Rwandan forces operated in fewer districts and engagements than the national forces, and violence in areas of restricted access may be under-reported (see Section 3.4). Even so, the contrast is large and consistent across years. Bonate *et al.* (2024, p. 6) help to explain the difference through communication in Kiswahili with the local populations, who often welcomed the Rwandans as liberators.

A key clarification for the study follows from these data. The effectiveness and discipline observed appear to be a property of the Rwandan force, built in Rwanda, and not of the Mozambican security system. The available data show no convergence of the national forces' pattern of civilian harm towards the partner's standard over four years of joint operations, which is consistent with the doubt raised by Shield (2023). The documents do not, however, allow us to determine whether, or to what extent, capability transfer was attempted.

Persistence of Violence

The gains on the ground did not, however, mean the defeat of the insurgents. The ICG (2022) estimated that their number had fallen from around 3,000 to perhaps as few as 300, but mainly because many foreign fighters had left the country and the Mozambican fighters had blended into the civilian population rather than surrendering. Chichava (2022) notes that as early as September 2021 the Rwandan President himself stated that the group was expanding into Niassa.

The following years confirm this mobility. In December 2022, Rwandan forces launched an operation in Ancuabe, in southern Cabo Delgado, where graphite mines are located ("Ruanda alarga apoio militar", 2023). Bofin (2025) further shows that, in 2024, Islamic State Mozambique violence on the N380 road between Macomia and Mocímboa da Praia was almost 70% higher than in 2023, and that, from 2023, the Rwandan forces' engagements with the group were confined to the districts of Mocímboa da Praia and Muidumbe.

Between December 2024 and March 2025, these forces took part in only four clashes, a posture that, according to the same author, may leave civilians exposed through inaction or delayed reaction. In April 2025, the group made its first significant incursion into Niassa since 2021, and on 3 May three Rwandan soldiers were killed in Mocímboa da Praia (ACLED, 2025a).

The humanitarian impact mirrors this ambiguity. In its assessment covering Cabo Delgado, Nampula and Niassa, with data collected between 15 May and 15 June 2024, the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024) counted 577,545 internally displaced persons and 610,732 returnees, both figures referring to cumulative displacement since 2017. The returns point to security gains, but more than half a million people remained outside their areas of origin three years after the arrival of the Rwandan troops. This pattern is consistent with, although it does not prove, the displacement effect commonly associated with military pressure that is not accompanied by a political response: violence moves elsewhere, but it does not disappear.

Legal Framework, Financing and Interests

While the cooperation advanced quickly on the ground, it advanced slowly on the legal front. According to Moztimes (2025), the 2021 arrangement was never submitted to the Assembleia da República (the Mozambican Parliament), and its essential terms were not disclosed. On 3 June 2022, the two countries signed an extradition treaty and an agreement on mutual legal assistance in criminal matters (Ministry of Justice of Rwanda, 2022), which Parliament ratified only in March 2024 ("Frelimo majority vote", 2024; Centro para Democracia e Direitos Humanos [CDD], 2025). Finally, the status of forces agreement, which according to Moztimes (2025) regulates immunities, jurisdiction over offences committed by military personnel and customs matters, was signed by the two defence ministers only on 27 August 2025, in Kigali ("Moçambique e Ruanda reafirmam compromisso", 2025), by which time the contingent reportedly numbered around 5,000 personnel (Moztimes, 2025).

The same lack of predictability is evident in the financing. The European Union, through the European Peace Facility, approved EUR 20 million in December 2022 and a further EUR 20 million in November 2024 for equipment and strategic airlift for the Rwandan troops (Council of the European Union, 2022, 2024). On the Mozambican side, the sources do not agree. ACLED (2025b) states that the Rwandan forces cost more than USD 10 million per month and that Mozambique resumed payments after suspending them in August 2024, whereas the CDD (2025) reports monthly arrears of between USD 2 and 4 million since that date and warns of the nebulous nature of the intervention. The two figures do not necessarily measure the same thing, and neither could be checked against official Mozambican or Rwandan budget documents, which are not public; they are therefore reported here as attributed estimates. From the accountability perspective that guided the study, this is perhaps the most worrying finding: the State does not disclose how much it pays for its own security.

At the same time, economic interests accompanied the military cooperation, with Donelli (2022, p. 29) noting a memorandum between the investment promotion agencies of the two countries. Later, on 7 November 2025, the Mozambique LNG consortium lifted force majeure, after the Government had confirmed the security measures and the continuation of cooperation with Rwanda (TotalEnergies, 2026). The security of the enclave thus became a bargaining asset for Maputo, for Kigali and for the company.

Bringing together the elements of the four subsections, Table 3 summarises the results by analytical dimension.

Table 3. Summary of results by analytical dimension

Dimension	Main Evidence	Who Produces the Result	Assessment
Operational effectiveness: recovering territory	Recapture of Mocímboa da Praia in 2021; expulsion from the Messalo bases; protection of Afungi and Palma	Rwandan force	High
Protection of civilians	Two events against civilians attributed to the Rwandans in three and a half years; between 8% and 21% of FADM violence targeting civilians per year	Rwandan force, with no transfer to the FADM	High
Operational effectiveness: holding	Insurgents blended into the population; violence almost 70% higher on the N380 in 2024;	Mozambican State and partners	Limited

territory	incursion into Niassa in 2025; 577,545 displaced persons in 2024		
Institutional sustainability	2021 arrangement not ratified; status of forces agreement only in 2025; divergent cost figures; dependence on European funding	Mozambican State	Weak

Source: Authors (2026), based on Bofin (2025), Bonate *et al.* (2024), CDD (2025), ICG (2022), IOM (2024) and Moztimes (2025).

The table makes visible the imbalance that underpins the thesis. The first two dimensions show high results, but both are attributable to the Rwandan force. The last two, which depend on the Mozambican State, show limited or weak results. The assessments in the last column are qualitative judgements by the authors, based on the evidence listed, and not measured scores. In short, the cooperation was strongest where Mozambique delegated and weakest where Mozambique would have had to build.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The Rwandan military effectiveness described by Shield (2023) and by Bonate *et al.* (2024) is consistent with the results of this study. The same results show, however, why this effectiveness was not enough. The ICG's (2022) observation about insurgents who blended into the population without being defeated anticipated what the 2024 and 2025 data would later show. Franco and Ajú (2022) drew the same lesson from Somalia and Mali, and the Cabo Delgado evidence points in the same direction.

Langa's (2024) thesis on the internationalisation of the conflict, for its part, finds only partial support. It is true that the cooperation internationalised the response and intertwined security and economic interests, as Donelli (2022) also shows. However, the evidence does not support the image of a predatory Rwandan actor, since it was the force with the lowest recorded level of violence against civilians. In the reading this study proposes, an important part of the problem lies on the Mozambican side, in the way the cooperation was governed: without a known parliamentary framework for more than four years, with uncertain costs and without a known plan for the transfer of capabilities. Njelezi (2023) envisaged a supporting role for foreign forces alongside the FDS; what the documents record is, to a large extent, a substitute role. This is an interpretation of the documentary record, not a finding that the documents establish directly.

Schutz's (2016) reading of Southern Africa is likewise called into question by the case. SAMIM left in 2024 with its mandate exhausted, while a partner from outside SADC, partly funded by the European Union, stayed on and strengthened its presence (Council of the European Union, 2024; Massango, 2024). The security of a SADC member thus came to depend on an actor from another region and on a non-African funder. Events after the period of analysis illustrate this dependence: on 14 March 2026, Rwanda warned that it would withdraw its troops if sustainable international funding for the mission was not found, after reports that EU funding would not be renewed beyond May (Nhamirre *et al.*, 2026). The regional security community remains under construction, but it does not yet have its own means to respond to a protracted crisis.

Despite these findings, there are alternative explanations that preclude attributing all of the variation in violence to Rwanda, or the persistence of violence solely to weaknesses in the bilateral cooperation. According to the ICG (2022), SAMIM operated in parallel, the departure of foreign fighters weakened the group, and the insurgents' choice to disperse may explain part of the reduction in armed activity shortly after 2021. Beyond the cooperation itself, the socio-economic grievances identified by Habibe *et al.* (2019), Cambrão and Julião (2022) and Feijó (2021), the insurgents' adaptive strategy and the group's transnational connections (Bonate, 2022) continued to operate independently of how the cooperation was governed. Documentary analysis does not make it possible to isolate the effect of each factor, nor to demonstrate that legal and financial opacity caused the persistence of the conflict. It does, nonetheless, allow us to state that the two coexisted and that the former made the cooperation more vulnerable, as the suspension of payments in 2024 suggests.

To make the strength of each claim explicit, Table 4 distinguishes the findings that the evidence establishes from the interpretations advanced by the study.

Table 4. Established findings and interpretations

Claim	Status	Evidence base	Main limitation
Rwandan forces contributed decisively to the recapture of Mocímboa da Praia (Aug. 2021) and to the protection of Afungi and Palma	Established	ICG (2022); Bonate *et al.* (2024); "Mozambican and Rwandan forces capture" (2021)	Joint operations with the FADM and SAMIM; individual contributions cannot be isolated
Very few recorded events of violence against civilians by Rwandan forces, compared with the FADM and the police	Established (recorded events)	Bofin (2025); ACLED (2025b)	Reported-event data; different exposure; possible under-reporting
Violence persisted and shifted (N380 in 2024; Niassa in 2025), and large-scale displacement remained	Established	Bofin (2025); ACLED (2025a); IOM (2024)	Data describe events, not their causes
Legal instruments came late (agreements of 2022, ratified in 2024; status of forces agreement in 2025) and costs were not publicly disclosed	Established	Ministry of Justice of Rwanda (2022); "Frelimo majority vote" (2024); "Moçambique e Ruanda reafirmam compromisso" (2025); CDD (2025)	Texts of the 2021 arrangement and of the status of forces agreement unpublished; cost figures are estimates
Rwandan effectiveness was not transferred to the national forces	Partly established	Bofin (2025); Shield (2023)	Indicator limited to patterns of civilian harm; no data on training or transfer efforts
Opacity and the absence of capability transfer limited the contribution to stabilisation	Interpretation	Co-occurrence of opacity and persistent violence; suspension of payments in 2024	Cannot be isolated from socio-economic drivers, insurgent adaptation and regional factors
The case fits the configuration of delegated containment	Interpretation (conceptual)	Convergence of the findings above	Single case; analytical rather than statistical generalisation

Source: Authors (2026).

CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the research question, namely the extent to which military cooperation between Mozambique and Rwanda functioned, between 2021 and 2025, as an effective mechanism for responding to the insurgency in Cabo Delgado, the answer is that it functioned as an effective mechanism of containment, but not as a mechanism for resolving the conflict.

With regard to the first objective, the chronological reconstruction revealed a cooperation that arose from the presidential choice of a bilateral partner, which preserved the Government's control over the external

intervention, and that advanced on the ground long before it had rules. The military gains were concentrated in 2021, whereas the legal and financial instruments only emerged between 2022 and 2025.

As regards the second objective, the evidence shows that the Rwandan intervention contributed decisively to recovering territory, protected the gas enclave and was associated with very few recorded events of violence against civilians. It also shows that the national forces' pattern of civilian harm did not converge with that of the partner, and that the cooperation did not prevent the dispersal of the insurgents, the increase in violence between Macomia and Mocímboa da Praia in 2024 or its spread to Niassa in 2025.

Concerning the third objective, the cooperation operated for more than four years without a public legal framework, with costs that no official document clarifies and with financing that depended in part on external donors. In addition, the security of the enclave turned the cooperation into an economic instrument for the three actors involved.

With respect to the fourth objective, the results point to measures that respond directly to the gaps identified in Section 4: an annual report from the Government to the parliamentary defence and security committee, setting out the costs and expected duration of the Rwandan presence (responding to the opacity documented in Section 4.4); a negotiated plan for the transfer of capabilities, with verifiable civilian protection targets for the FADM (responding to the absence of convergence documented in Section 4.2); plural financing, built together with SADC and the African Union (responding to the financial vulnerability shown by the 2024 suspension of payments); and a political and social response to accompany the military one, with attention to the economic inclusion of young people and women (Feijó, 2021), since the persistence of violence documented in Section 4.3 is not reducible to military factors.

For all these reasons, the thesis advanced throughout the article is supported, with one qualification. The evidence establishes that the cooperation was effective in containment and did not lead to stabilisation. It suggests, but does not prove, that the lack of transparency and of capability transfer contributes to explaining this gap, because documentary analysis does not make it possible to isolate this factor from others (Table 4). The concept of delegated containment proposed by the study describes the configuration observed: Mozambique obtained security, but borrowed security. Until that security is incorporated into national institutions, stability in Cabo Delgado will continue to depend on the will and the funding of third parties. Future research based on interviews and fieldwork, and comparison with other bilateral deployments, would allow the concept and the causal interpretation advanced here to be tested more rigorously.

REFERENCES

1. Alden, C., & Chichava, S. (2021). Cabo Delgado: 'Al Shabaab/ISIS' and the crisis in Southern Africa (Policy Brief PB-14/21). Rabat, Morocco: Policy Center for the New South. Retrieved from https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/PB_14-21_Alden_Chichava.pdf
2. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. (2025a). Cabo Ligado update: 21 April – 4 May 2025. Retrieved from https://acleddata.com/update/cabo-ligado-update-21-april-4-may-2025
3. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. (2025b). Cabo Ligado update: 30 June – 13 July 2025. Retrieved from https://acleddata.com/update/cabo-ligado-update-30-june-13-july-2025
4. Biddle, S., Macdonald, J., & Baker, R. (2018). Small footprint, small payoff: The military utility of security force assistance. Journal of Strategic Studies, 41(1–2), 89–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1307745
5. Bofin, P. (2025). Rwanda in Mozambique: Limits to civilian protection. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. Retrieved from https://acleddata.com/report/rwanda-mozambique-limits-civilian-protection
6. Bonate, L. J. K. (2022). O jihadismo transnacional e a insurgência em Cabo Delgado, Moçambique. Afro-Ásia, 65, 519–553. https://doi.org/10.9771/aa.v0i65.46936
7. Bonate, L. J. K., Israel, P., & Rosário, C. (2024). God, grievance and greed: War in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. Kronos: Southern African Histories, 50, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.17159/2309-9585/2024/v50a18

8. Brasil, P. A. P. (2023). Terrorismo ou insurgência? Reflexão teórica sobre a natureza do conflito armado em Cabo Delgado. Hoplos: Revista de Estudos Estratégicos e Relações Internacionais, 7(12), 125–147. Retrieved from https://periodicos.uff.br/hoplos/article/view/58256
9. Cambrão, P., & Julião, D. M. (2022). Cabo Delgado: guerra fratricida (des)conhecida? Causas e implicações internas a partir de um olhar antropossociológico. Sociologia: Revista da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 44, 67–84. https://doi.org/10.21747/08723419/soc44a4
10. Carneiro de Sousa, I. (2025). Insurreição, terrorismo e guerra em Cabo Delgado, Moçambique (2017-2025): levantamento de publicações científicas indexadas. RECIMA21: Revista Científica Multidisciplinar, 6(10), e6106888. https://doi.org/10.47820/recima21.v6i10.6888
11. Centro para Democracia e Direitos Humanos. (2025, May 28). Falta de pagamento das tropas ruandesas reacende debate sobre a necessidade da transparência na relação Kigali-Maputo. Política Moçambicana, VI(693). Retrieved from https://cddmoz.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Falta-de-pagamento-das-tropas-ruandesas-reacende-debate-sobre-a-necessidade-da-transparencia-na-relacao-Kigali-Maputo.pdf
12. Chichava, S. (2022). Maulana Ali Cassimo: insurgência no norte de Moçambique vista do Niassa (IDeIAS No. 147P). Maputo, Mozambique: Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos. Retrieved from https://www.iese.ac.mz/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ideias-147P-SC-1.pdf
13. Council of the European Union. (2022, December 1). European Peace Facility: Council adopts assistance measures in support of the armed forces of five countries. Retrieved from https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/01/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-assistance-measures-in-support-of-the-armed-forces-of-five-countries/
14. Council of the European Union. (2024, November 18). European Peace Facility: Council tops up support to the deployment of the Rwanda Defence Force to fight terrorism in Cabo Delgado. Retrieved from https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/11/18/european-peace-facility-council-tops-up-support-to-the-deployment-of-the-rwanda-defence-force-to-fight-terrorism-in-cabo-delgado/
15. Donelli, F. (2022). Rwanda's new military diplomacy (Note No. 31). Paris, France: Observatoire de l'Afrique centrale et australe. Retrieved from https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/dgris/Note%2031%20RWANDA'S%20NEW%20MILITARY%20DIPLOMACY.pdf
16. Feijó, J. (2021). O papel das mulheres no conflito em Cabo Delgado: entendendo ciclos viciosos da violência (Observador Rural No. 114). Maputo, Mozambique: Observatório do Meio Rural. Retrieved from https://omrmz.org/observador/or-114-o-papel-das-mulheres-no-conflito-em-cabo-delgado-entendendo-ciclos-viciosos-da-violencia/
17. Filipe Nyusi confirma presença de tropas do Ruanda em Cabo Delgado a pedido do seu Governo. (2021, July 9). VOA Português. Retrieved from https://www.voaportugues.com/a/filipe-nyusi-confirma-presen%C3%A7a-de-tropas-do-ruanda-em-cabo-delgado-a-pedido-do-seu-governo/5960043.html
18. Franco, A. C. S., & Ajú, M. M. (2022). Response to the Somali and Malian jihadist movements: What lessons for Mozambique? Political Observer: Revista Portuguesa de Ciência Política, 17, 91–105. https://doi.org/10.33167/2184-2078.RPCP2022.17/pp.91-105
19. Frelimo majority vote ratifies extradition treaty with Rwanda. (2024, March 21). AIM – Agência de Informação de Moçambique. Retrieved from https://aimnews.org/2024/03/21/frelimo-majority-vote-ratifies-extradition-treaty-with-rwanda
20. Habibe, S., Forquilha, S., & Pereira, J. (2019). Radicalização islâmica no norte de Moçambique: o caso de Mocímboa da Praia (Cadernos IESE No. 17). Maputo, Mozambique: Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos. Retrieved from https://www.iese.ac.mz/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/cadernos_17.pdf
21. International Crisis Group. (2022). Winning peace in Mozambique's embattled north (Africa Briefing No. 178). Brussels, Belgium: Author. Retrieved from https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/southern-africa/mozambique/winning-peace-mozambiques-embattled-north
22. International Organization for Migration. (2024). Mozambique — Mobility Tracking Assessment (Northern Mozambique) Round 21 (July 2024). Retrieved October 3, 2026, from

https://dtm.iom.int/reports/mozambique-mobility-tracking-assessment-northern-mozambique-round-21-july-2024

23. Krieg, A., & Rickli, J.-M. (2019). Surrogate warfare: The transformation of war in the twenty-first century. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
24. Langa, E. N. B. (2024). Moçambique: o extremismo violento e o terrorismo na província de Cabo Delgado. Revista Brasileira de Estudos Africanos, 9(18), 95–123. https://doi.org/10.22456/2448-3923.141971
25. Massango, A. (2024, July 5). SAMIM formally withdraws from Cabo Delgado. AIM – Agência de Informação de Moçambique. Retrieved from https://aimnews.org/2024/07/05/samim-formally-withdraws-from-cabo-delgado/
26. Ministry of Justice of Rwanda. (2022, June 3). An extradition treaty and a mutual legal assistance in criminal matters agreement were signed between Rwanda and Mozambique. Retrieved from https://www.minijust.gov.rw/news-detail/an-extradition-treaty-and-a-mutual-legal-assistance-in-criminal-matters-agreement-were-signed-between-rwanda-and-mozambique
27. Moçambique e Ruanda reafirmam compromisso no sector da Defesa e Segurança. (2025, August 28). AIM – Agência de Informação de Moçambique. Retrieved from https://aimnews.org/2025/08/28/mocambique-e-ruanda-reafirmam-compromisso-no-sector-da-defesa-e-seguranca
28. Mozambican and Rwandan forces capture Mocimboa da Praia – AIM. (2021, August 9). Club of Mozambique. Retrieved from https://clubofmozambique.com/news/mozambican-and-rwandan-forces-capture-mocimboa-da-praia-aim/
29. Moztimes. (2025, August 29). Mozambique, Rwanda sign Status of Forces agreement 4 years after first troop deployment. defenceWeb. Retrieved from https://defenceweb.co.za/land/land-land/mozambique-rwanda-sign-status-of-forces-agreement-4-years-after-first-troop-deployment/
30. Nhamirre, B., Verelst, B., & Abdullahi, S. (2026, April 1). Lessons from Rwanda's threat to withdraw from Cabo Delgado. ISS Today. Institute for Security Studies. Retrieved from https://issafrica.org/iss-today/lessons-from-rwanda-s-threat-to-withdraw-from-cabo-delgado
31. Njelezi, M. T. (2023). Insurgência em Cabo Delgado: uma análise para inferência da estratégia de combate ao fenómeno. Nação e Defesa, 164, 51–70. https://doi.org/10.47906/ND2023.164.03
32. Raleigh, C., Linke, A., Hegre, H., & Karlsen, J. (2010). Introducing ACLED: An armed conflict location and event dataset. Journal of Peace Research, 47(5), 651–660. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343310378914
33. Ruanda alarga apoio militar para a zona sul de Cabo Delgado. (2023, February 6). Observador. Retrieved from https://observador.pt/2023/02/06/ruanda-alarga-apoio-militar-para-a-zona-sul-de-cabo-delgado/
34. Salehyan, I. (2010). The delegation of war to rebel organizations. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 54(3), 493–515. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002709357890
35. Schutz, N. X. (2016). A integração securitária na África Austral: a SADC e o OPDS. Revista Brasileira de Estudos Africanos, 1(1), 223–242. Retrieved from https://seer.ufrgs.br/index.php/rbea/article/view/59488
36. Shield, R. (2023). The sources of Rwandan military effectiveness: State building, security assistance and the Cabo Delgado campaign. Journal of Southern African Studies, 49(5-6), 1041–1065. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2023.2316560
37. TotalEnergies. (2021, April 26). Total declares force majeure on Mozambique LNG project. Retrieved from https://totalenergies.com/news/press-releases/total-declares-force-majeure-mozambique-lng-project
38. TotalEnergies. (2026, January 29). Mozambique LNG announces the full restart of all its activities onshore and offshore in Mozambique. Retrieved from https://totalenergies.com/news/press-releases/mozambique-lng-announces-full-restart-all-its-activities-onshore-and-offshore