

European Union's Peacebuilding in Africa's Great Lakes Region as an Imperialist Project

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ABSTRACT

The European Union is carrying out an imperialist project of raw materials acquisition and perpetuation of centre-periphery dependency in Africa's Great Lakes region. This imperialist project has been camouflaged as peacebuilding with the purpose of achieving security, peace and development. As an international security actor, the EU has established its presence in Africa and consequently devised and implemented a wide range of international security mechanisms under the rubric of the Common Foreign and Defence Policy. This article has evaluated the EU's peacebuilding in the Great Lakes region and noted that it is purposed to further the economic interests of the EU rather than peacebuilding. It contextualizes the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Sudan, Angola, Central African Republic, Tanzania, Zambia and Burundi. Grounded in secondary qualitative data and explicated from the humanitarian-development approach, the paper argues that the EU has been unable to consolidate peacebuilding in the great Lakes region. It notes that both the EU's peacebuilding policy prescriptions and practical peacebuilding efforts have amounted to the advancement of the imperialists interests of the EU disguised as democracy promotion, economic liberalization and humanitarian aid. For the EU to be effective in peacebuilding in the Great Lakes Region, there is the urgent need to decolonize the peacebuilding process to focus on addressing the underlying causes of conflicts and their consequences. Effort needs to be made towards increasing funding, engaging of local actors.

Key Words: The European Union, Armed Conflicts, peacebuilding, humanitarian-development approach, neo-imperialism, the Great Lakes Region.

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the cold war, three conflict trends have evolved in Africa. These are the decline of interstate wars, the proliferation of intra-state conflicts (McGready & Crosson, 2023), increased involvement of the West or the so-called international community in peacebuilding activities in conflict affected-states, especially in developing countries. During the cold war, the mechanism for peace and security in the world was peacekeeping. This involved the mobilization and deployments of military missions to conflict-afflicted states. The international community was more concerned with the direct involvement in active conflicts and the settlement of disputes between states. However, the thinking of the international community began to shift remarkably from peacekeeping to peacebuilding following the Rwanda Geocide in 1994 ((McGready & Crosson, 2023). As McGready and Crosson (2023, p.10) pointed out, "At this this time, the belief that prevention and peaceful conflict resolution required significant investment began to take hold". Thus, the shift observed in the 1990s entailed moving away from narrow understanding of conflict as the moment in which force is used or violence manifests, toward expanding the scope of analysis that views conflict as a cycle or curve that can generate a context-specific policy response at any point in the process ((McGready & Crosson, 2023).

The Great Lakes region is one of the major conflict-affected regions in Africa. In the quest for peace, stability and development in the region, the international community has been involved in peacebuilding. The EU has carried out peacebuilding interventions in the Great Lakes region. This article has evaluated the EU's peacebuilding in the region, establishing that it has not been very effective in peacebuilding in the Region. It is the position of this article that EU's peacebuilding in the Great Lakes region is characterized by the promotion of Western liberal values of democracy, human rights, the promotion of the market economy and the rule of law

at the detriment of addressing the root causes of conflict. Hence, EU's interventions have not translated into significantly improved peace and security environment in the region. While the EU continues to parade itself and assortment of policy frameworks as peacebuilding technologies, the reality is that the EU is pursuing a hidden agenda of raw materials acquisition disguised as peacebuilding. Fundamentally, the Great Lakes region is an enormously natural resource rich region. Great powers, including the EU are in competition for the acquisition of oil and gas, rare earth minerals, gold, diamond, copper, cobalt, Tin, Tantalum and Tungsten (3Ts), and Emerald. Thus, the EU is using peacebuilding as a proxy for the extraction of critical minerals which are needed as raw materials for the production of new technologies and sustainability of the energy transition. Therefore, peacebuilding is masking EU's imperialist project in Africa's Great Lakes region.

Conceptual Clarification

Peacebuilding

Peace is a public good. For this reason, peacebuilding has received significant scholarly attention in peace, security and development research (Bruk & Milante (2014). According to the International Peace Institute (2009, p.1), "peacebuilding involves implementing a range of reconstruction and reform efforts in countries with some of the worst fragile, fluid and unpredictable political environments". For Bruk and Milante (2014, p.224), peacebuilding is a "form of soft power and negotiations to nudge political processes into the public and constructive sphere of diplomacy and dialogue, and away from escalation into violence and conflict". It is the contention of this paper that peacebuilding is a continuum that ranges from conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict peacebuilding activities. The above conceptualizations of peacebuilding are concerned with post-conflict peacebuilding activities and have therefore offered a limited understanding of peacebuilding. Tying peacebuilding to post-conflict activities such as reconstruction, rehabilitation, recovery and resilience, while being significant in the management of post-conflict situations, offer limited understanding of peacebuilding by ignoring the crucial issues of conflict prevention and the management of active conflicts.

Galtung's (1996; 2012), conceptualization of peace is helpful in unravelling a comprehensive understanding of the concept of peacebuilding which includes conflict prevention and crisis management and at the same time, embodies post-conflict activities. Galtung (1996) discusses peace in terms of negative and positive peace. Negative peace is characterized by the absence of violence or war, while positive peace is the absence of social injustice (Galtung & Fischer 2013). Put differently, negative peace means the absence of physical violence while positive peace entails the absence of structural violence. Therefore, peace means the absence of violence and the presence of social justice (Galtung, 1996). Thus, as the International Peace Institute (IPI) (2009, p.4) maintains, "Peacebuilding ranges from achieving negative peace or absence of war to the expansive positive peace which encapsulates the need to redress root causes and deliver social and political goods, including justice, equity and reconciliation". Peacebuilding is about sustaining peace. The United Nations General Assembly specifically linked peacebuilding to sustaining peace by stressing that:

Sustaining peace' should be broadly understood as a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account, which encompasses activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, assisting parties to conflict to end hostilities, ensuring national reconciliation, and moving towards recovery, reconstruction and development, and emphasizing that sustaining peace is a shared task and responsibility that needs to be fulfilled by the Government and all other national stakeholders, and should flow through all three pillars of the United Nations engagement at all stages of conflict, and in all its dimensions, and needs sustained international attention and assistance (75th Session of the UNGA, 2020).

It can be deduced from the foregoing that peacebuilding intertwines conflict prevention, crisis management and conflict resolution. Conflict prevention is the first step in peacebuilding. Bruk and Milante (2014) have pointed out the significance of conflict prevention by stating rightly that "no army can guarantee freedom from violence." Peacebuilding is broader than peacekeeping. Peacekeeping can be distinguished into three phases; first generation, second generation and third generation peacekeeping (Jentzsch, 2024). First generation peacekeeping involves the deployment of an impartial military force after a ceasefire has been reached to oversee the implementation of the agreement through non-coercive means. First generation peacekeeping is based on the

“holy trinity” of consent, impartiality, and the minimum use of force. They are designed and deployed primarily in response to interstate conflicts and is often termed the first generation of peacekeeping (Doyle & Sambanis 2006).

Second Generation or wider peacekeeping emerged following the adaptation of peacekeeping to the dynamics of conflict following the end of the cold war. The decline of interstate wars and the simultaneous rise in intrastate wars since the end of the Cold War led to the emergence of second-generation peacekeeping. This involve the deployment of peacekeeping missions to countries where peace agreements are either absent or fragile, and ongoing violence required peacekeepers to be engaged in the delivery of humanitarian aid (Bellamy et al. 2011, 194–95). The task of such missions often includes separating forces, disarming combatants, organizing elections, and protecting humanitarian and UN personnel (Doyle et al. 1997). This unclear status of wider or second-generation peacekeeping has created challenges for peacekeepers in the field because the means based on the principles of consent, impartiality, and minimum use of force do not provide adequate tools to fulfill the desired ends, as was demonstrated by the failed UN operation in Rwanda.

The “third generation” of grants a more robust mandate to peacekeeping forces to use force and by pass the consent of the parties in conflict if necessary. Third generation of peacekeeping often includes elements of “peace enforcement,” (Doyle & Sambanis 2006). With the evolution of “wider peacekeeping” and the growing demands on missions deployed to countries with no or fragile peace agreements between the belligerents, peace operations came to be linked to development efforts more generally. Thus, the concept of “peacebuilding” emerged, referring to efforts with the goal not only of separating the conflict parties but also of assisting in creating the foundations for lasting peace (UN General Assembly and Security Council 2000; Jentzsch, 2014). Peace operations are international interventions involving civilian and military personnel in inter- and intrastate wars to assist countries in the transformation from war to peace. Its scope is limited to largely short-term operations that include elements of peacekeeping, peace enforcement, and peacebuilding by international organizations and states in the immediate aftermath of armed conflict. Mandates of peace operations often include support for peace processes, assistance in implementing or enforcing ceasefires or peace agreements, or helping in building a stable peace (Bellamy et al. 2011). Medium or long-term post-conflict reconstruction and development activities, as well as humanitarian relief, are excluded from the analysis.

International Peacebuilding as Imperialist Project

In the preceding discussion, the concept of peacebuilding was examined. It maintained that peacebuilding activities undertaken by an international peacebuilding actor such as the EU should prevent the outbreak of conflicts, bring an end to conflicts and enable societies affected by conflicts to recover and reconstruct themselves in post-conflict situations. But international peacebuilding often degenerates into imperialist project. What is imperialism and under what conditions is peacebuilding or can peacebuilding become an imperialist project? According to Kinsey (2024), imperialism is about one state or entity called a metropole asserting influence over another state or entity in ways that exploit the resources and wealth of the latter for the benefit of the former. Imperialists justify global capitalist expansionism and exploitation by pointing to differences between the metropolises and the periphery in terms of technology and military might, political organization, economic vision, biology, civilizational development, religious belief, morality, or system of justice. Imperialism was fundamentally about creating and perpetuating global inequality and underdevelopment in countries that were subjected to it. The era of imperialism ended with decolonization in the late twentieth century. This paved the way for the reappearance of imperialism in the form that is known as new imperialism. New imperialism is out to reconstruct social relations and change behaviour and attitudes through levels of metropolitan monitoring, intervention and regulation unprecedented since the colonial period (Schellhaas & Seegers, n.d). According to Bowen (2023), new imperialism started in the late twentieth century and took on different forms that did not necessarily require the formal conquest and annexation of territory. Erstwhile colonialists continue to leverage relations of dependency that were created during the colonial era. New imperialism typically manifests as neo-imperialism, economic imperialism, cultural imperialism, liberal imperialism, humanitarian imperialism, democratic imperialism, Western imperialism and American imperialism. It is the argument of this article that when a peacebuilding project rather than prevent conflicts, put an end to conflict, or address existential challenges in post-conflict situations, and instead seeks to achieve the masked interests of the international peace actor, such peacebuilding interventions tantamount to an imperils

project. An imperialist project is a deliberate policy, strategy, or coordinated effort by a dominant state, nation or external actor to extend its power, control and influence over other countries, regions or peoples. It involves a systematic attempt aimed at achieving political, economic and cultural dominance. The core attributes of an imperialist project are power extension, the use of military and economic measures of control and dominance, resource extraction, diplomatic engagements that are tailored towards the realization of vested interests and ideological justification. An imperialist project is therefore designed to benefit an external actor. However, the external tries to mask vested interests by presenting itself as a benevolent actor working in the mutual interests of all. The African continent in general, and the Great Lakes region was colonized by European countries. During that time, colonialism was justified as a civilizing mission. But at the heart of colonialism lay an imperialist project which centered on the extraction of Africa's natural resources and the expropriation of value from the periphery to the metropolises (Ake, 1982).

In the late twentieth century, European colonialism of Africa has reasserted itself in what has become known as new imperialist project. The Europeans are no longer politically in charge. Even the ideology of new imperialism is different from the civilizing rhetoric of colonialism. The ideology of new imperialism is military intervention, international diplomacy, economic liberalization, promotion of democracy and international humanitarian support to Africa to overcome multidimensional challenges for sustainable development (Rieff, 2003; Ignatieff, 2003). The justification for Europe's humanitarianism to Africa is that Africa is a poor continent. Nothing is said about Africa's enormous natural resources that Europe and other great powers have so heavily depended upon for their continued economy development. In the area of peacebuilding, the humanitarian ideology has interconnected peace, security and development - the humanitarian development nexus. This has resulted into peacebuilding imperialism. International peacebuilders are concerned not only with rebuilding infrastructure or redistributing material resources, but also attempt to transform societies by changing the attitudes and behaviour of people living within them. They are concerned with strategic access to raw materials that are crucial drivers of their economic supremacy (Schellhaas & Seegers, n.d). Thus, while pursuing vested interests, Africans are made to view European presence in Africa as entailing nothing more than European goodwill. The fact that European presence justified as peacebuilding translates into new imperialism is often overlooked or neglected. More so, the fact that the pursuit of vested interests by the EU sometimes constitutes a source of conflicts, and the intractability of conflicts furthers Europe's vested interests seems often neglected in peacebuilding research. From the foregoing, it is the reasoned position of this article that any peacebuilding project that profiles itself as conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict peacebuilding but in reality, is pursuing economic interests of raw materials acquisition such as the EU is doing in the Great Lakes region is an imperialist peacebuilding project. involves a range of activities along the continuum of conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict peacebuilding.

The European Union

The European Union (EU) is an economic and political union of 27 European countries. The origin of the EU can be traced to several treaties signed in the aftermath of World War II. The first step in the establishment of the union was aimed at fostering economic cooperation, based on the idea that countries that trade with one another become economically interdependent and so are more likely to avoid conflict. The EU (2023) itself has pointed out that it started as an economic project to help raise living standards in post-war Europe. This has led to the creation of the world's largest single-market area, where people, goods, services and money move freely across international borders. The result was the European Economic Community, created in 1958 with the initial aim of increasing economic cooperation between six countries: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands (EU, 2023). Since then, 22 more countries have joined (the United Kingdom left the EU on 31 January 2020) and a huge single market (also known as the internal market) has been created and continues to develop towards its full potential. From a purely economic union, the EU has evolved into an organization spanning many different policy areas, ranging from international affairs and security, climate, environment and health to external relations and security, justice and migration. The EU is a union of values. These are respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights. These values are set out in the EU treaties and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which brings together all the personal, civic, political, economic and social rights enjoyed by people within the EU (European Union, 2023). Since the end of the cold war, International affairs and security have become important key issues within the EU mandate. The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), enables the EU to frame policies and act as

one in world affairs, allowing Member States to tackle challenges they cannot solve alone and ensuring the security and prosperity of EU citizens and other countries. The CFSP) is implemented by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and supported by the European External Action Service (EEAS) which is the EU's diplomatic service. The EU's external actions are guided by the principles that inspired its own creation and development, and which it seeks to promote in the wider world, including peace, democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms (European Union, 2022). The EU's approach to preventive diplomacy is embedded in a wider ambition to 'preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security'. Given deteriorating security and increasing geopolitical tensions worldwide, it is evident that preventive diplomacy requires sustained and enhanced attention by the EU (Mcgearty & Crosson, 2023).

Elements of prevention emerge in all major strategy and policy documents of the EU in the realm of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The EU's approach to preventive diplomacy is embedded in a wider ambition to 'preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security'. Article 3 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) states that 'the Union's aim is to promote peace, its values and the wellbeing of its peoples. Article 21(2)(c) of the TEU states that among its purposes, the EU shall work to 'preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security, in accordance with the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, with the principles of the Helsinki Final Act, and with the aims of the Charter of Paris, including those relating to external borders'. The EU's integrated approach, to conflict prevention, the EU Global Strategy has spelled out conflict prevention process which entails several levels of action as follows:

The EU will act at all stages of the conflict cycle, acting promptly on prevention, responding responsibly and decisively to crises, investing in stabilization, and avoiding premature disengagement when a new crisis erupts. The EU will act at different levels of governance: conflicts such as those in Syria and Libya have local, national, regional and global dimensions which must be addressed. Finally, none of these conflicts can be solved by us alone. Sustainable peace can only be achieved through comprehensive agreements rooted in broad, deep and durable regional and international partnerships, which the EU will foster and support ((Mcgearty & Crosson, 2023).

The coming into being of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 established and operationalized the EU diplomatic service, the European External Action Service (EEAS), to reinforce its pursuit of these objectives. This was followed by the EU Gothenburg Programme or the programme for the prevention of violent conflicts. The Council of the EU adopted conclusions on conflict prevention in 2011, which called for efforts to strengthen EU early warning system, reinforce conflict risk analyses, and translate these efforts into the early design of viable, operational, coherent and realistic options for preventive action, including mediation.⁶ In doing so, the Council reaffirmed the importance of working with partners such as the United Nations (UN), Organization for Security in Central Europe (OSCE), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the World Bank, and African Union (AU), among others. In the 2016, the EU Global Strategy, re-stated the idea of preventive diplomacy responding to early warning with early action.

The EU also put in place the EU's 2017 Joint Communication on strategic approach to resilience in the EU's external action. This policy document has elaborated on root causes of conflicts and partnership, underscoring the need for the EU to strengthen its work on conflict prevention and peacebuilding through introducing a resilience dimension that puts a stronger emphasis on a more complete, shared analysis, engagement at community and state level, and, where appropriate, the rolling out of the integrated approach to conflict and crisis set out in the EU Global Strategy'.⁸ Emphasis was once again put on early warning and analysis upstream was accordingly mirrored by the importance given to socio-economic development cooperation, under the heading of resilience, in the European Commission's funding instruments (programming) in third countries. In the January 2018 Council Conclusions on the Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises, the Council of the EU underscored the importance of mediation, notably through the EU conflict Early Warning System. It stressed the importance of diplomatic engagement, particularly mediation, in conflict prevention. It therefore called for the need to build up the mediation capacities of the European External Assistance Service EEAS to assist in prevention and resolution of local and national conflicts and further work on the ability to rapidly deploy mediation expertise to EU delegations and in support of other international and regional organizations. The

December 2018 Council Conclusions on Women, Peace and Security highlighted the need for a gender perspective to preventive diplomacy.

With regards to EU's early action, there is the 2021 Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument for a Global Europe (NDICI) which has required the EU to conduct in-depth conflict analysis to ensure that EU programming and external action in fragile and conflict-affected contexts is context-and-conflict-sensitive. The March 2022 EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence also reiterated the importance of preventive diplomacy, and called on the EU to translate analysis capacities and early warning systems (including through horizon scanning and gender-responsive conflict analyses) into preventive engagement, including enhanced partnerships with the UN, OSCE, African Union (AU) and ASEAN.¹⁰ One of the Strategic Compass's deliverables, the recently-published Civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) Compact ¹¹ aims to address how the EU can enhance the effectiveness of its civilian CSDP missions. By formally recognizing that preventive diplomacy can also occur under the auspices of and through civilian capacity building, the Compact has added a civilian (non-military) operational dimension to the EU's conflict prevention toolkit.

Theoretical Framework:

Humanitarian Development Theory

This article has evaluated EU's peacebuilding in Africa using the humanitarian-development theory (Cunningham (2017; Lie 2020; International Peace Institute, 2018). The theory offers an analytical link between the EU's peacebuilding mechanisms in the Great Lakes region and the crucial issues of peace and development in the region. The main thrust of the theory is that conflict prevention or humanitarian intervention should be cognizant of the imperative of conflict prevention, peace, and development. It postulates that reliance on the provision of humanitarian relief assistance which ignores the necessity of addressing the underlying causes of conflict is inadequate means of achieving peaceful societies. The significance of this approach in the management of humanitarian crisis was highlighted at the United Nations World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. The main argument of this theory, as adumbrated by the International Peace Institute (IPI) (2018, p. 1) is that more emphasis should be on addressing the root causes of conflicts which may pave the way for development rather than reliance on the provision of relief support to populations affected by conflicts. Described as the "sustaining peace" approach (International Peace Institute (2018), the humanitarian-development nexus emphasizes the creation of a shared vision of a peaceful society and ensuring that the needs of all demographic segments are taken into consideration.

The International Peace Institute (IPI) (2018) maintains that the sustaining peace approach is based on four key assumptions: (i) Peace is local grows from the bottom-up. This implies that priority is given to the local people and communities as the starting point for discussion about peace and development. It is suspicious of top-down approaches to conflict resolution and development which rarely establish the basis for long-lasting (ii) the external factors involved in peacebuilding and development are to examine and reinforce the peacekeeping mechanisms that people still rely on during times of unrest (iii) External interveners must make sure that, despite their best intentions, their assistance does not inadvertently worsen the exact factors that gave rise to conflict or impair the ability for healing and reconciliation. (iv) if international humanitarian assistance concurrently attends to the security, human rights, development, and humanitarian needs of resentful populations, it stands a greater chance of establishing the conditions necessary for maintaining peace. The reasoning behind this is that development may promote peace, and humanitarian activities can support development, and populations affected by conflict do not experience these needs sequentially (IPI, 2018).

The humanitarian-development approach offers a new way of humanitarian action that transcends the delivery of humanitarian assistance and recognises the fact that, while humanitarian assistance is crucial for meeting the needs of those impacted by conflicts in Africa, it is insufficient to address the root causes of conflicts and needs of Africa's most vulnerable people as well as chart the roadmap for peace, recovery and development. The humanitarian development approach, as Strand (2020) argues, aims to address the root causes of African conflicts and connect humanitarian action with conflict prevention. Lie (2020) contends that the understanding of the war-to-peace transition as a continuum serves as its justification for the use of this approach. Thus, it is

important to remember that conflict and peace are not mutually exclusive, and that different parties must be encouraged to work together to bring about peace. To achieve humanitarian-development nexus in Africa, humanitarian actors are expected to uphold the humanitarian ideals of humanism, impartiality, independence, and neutrality.

The humanitarian-development nexus is applicable to this analysis in that EU's peacebuilding approach is concerned with preventive diplomacy in Africa. However, it should be noted that the African continent has been a theatre of armed conflicts and development crisis. African countries such as Libya, Niger, Mali, DR Congo, Burkina Faso, Chad, Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Burundi and Eritrea have been ravaged by violent conflicts (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (ACLED), 2025). The humanitarian-development approach is applicable to this paper because the subject matter of preventive diplomacy in Africa intersects humanitarian intervention as a means of preventing the outbreak of conflicts or bringing about the de-escalation or resolution of ongoing conflicts to pave the way for peace, recovery and development in Africa. However, the EU's peacebuilding has been unable to achieve the humanitarian-development nexus in the Great Lakes region.

A Brief Profile of the Great Lakes Region

The name 'Great Lakes Region' has been derived from the freshwater lakes and river basins found within the Central and Eastern parts of Africa (ACCORD, 2016). The African Great Lakes are some of the world's most valuable natural resources, representing over 25% of the world's surface freshwater; harbouring the most productive freshwater fisheries in the world, and are the headwaters to the three great rivers of Africa, the Nile, the Congo, and the Zambezi; and, they are global treasures of aquatic biodiversity, containing over 10% of all species of freshwater fish in the world (African Centre for Aquatic Research and Education, n.d). Conceptually, the Great Lakes region has the narrow and broad definition. From a narrow point of view, it is used to refer to former Belgian colonies; Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

From an expansive point of view, the Great Lakes Region is defined within the context of the regional entity known as the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) (ACCORD, 2016). The International Conference on the Great Lakes Region extended that concept to eleven countries: Angola, Burundi, Central Africa Republic, DRC, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia (ACCORD, 2016).

The Great Lakes is an immensely resource endowed region in the world. The region possesses enormous reserves of oil and gas, rare earth minerals, gold, diamonds, copper, cobalt, nickel, emerald, and Tin, Tantalum and Tungsten (3T Minerals. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the world's most mineral rich country in the regions. The DRC holds the largest reserves of coltan globally. Coltan is an essential component of modern electronics, and a mineral which is critical for the global energy transition embarked upon by Europe (Kalentzacos, 2019; Fernandes, 2025). It also possesses large reserves of Cobalt, Copper, Gold, Diamonds and Tin. Sudan is an oil rich exporting country with enormous reserves of crude oil and gas. Angola, like Sudan, is primarily an oil and gas powerhouse, alongside a robust diamond extraction economy. Burundi is endowed with rare earth elements, nickel and 3T minerals. Tanzania holds reserves of gold, industrial minerals and offshore natural gas. Zambia is the cornerstone of Africa's copper belt, yielding immense copper, cobalt and emerald reserves. Rwanda produces Tin, Tantalum and Tungsten (3Ts). The DRC is home to one of the world's longest running conflicts, and largest and complex humanitarian crisis. As Fernandes (2025) notes, in conflicts pasts and present, minerals have been the underlying factor in the Great Lakes region, with armed groups often taking control of mines and illegally extracting and smuggling minerals out of the region and using the rents to fund military operations. The region lacks control over its natural resources owing to its dependence on foreign capital for the exploitation of natural resources. Conflicts in the Great Lakes region interconnect intricate dynamics such as state, non-state armed groups, external actors and ethnic grievances. For instance, since 2022, armed violence in eastern DRC has spiked again following the resurgence of violence by the Rwandan-backed armed group called the M23. M23 has been able to seize Goma, the provincial capital of North Kivu, and the largest city in Eastern DRC (Fernandes, 2025). The fighting in Eastern DRC has resulted in a total of 7.3 million internally displaced persons and millions of refugees scattered across national borders in the great Lakes region (UNHCR, 2025; Fernandes, 2025).

African countries in the Great Lakes region are among the African states, which have been most affected by violent and armed conflicts in the last few decades. Thus, as Shyaka (2008) noted, the Great Lakes Region constitutes a complex network of political and economic interactions with significant implications for peace, security and governance. It is also a region with interlinked conflicts and common fundamental problems that emanate from post-colonial challenges to state-building and nation-building. Council of the European Union (2023, p.2) pointed out that “The continuous cycle of conflict, violence, and tensions has undermined the talent, creativity and entrepreneurship of its people and prevented the region from benefiting from its enormous potential in terms of biodiversity, tropical forests, water and agricultural assets, and raw materials deposits”. Shyaka (2008) argued that all the theories that explain sources of conflict are applicable to each of the four countries under study. These theoretical explanations are competition for the control of state power, struggle or fight in search of better living conditions, conflicts are caused by identity related problems, and demand for change against resistance to change. The Great Lakes region has experienced recurrent, interconnected conflicts. According to the Council of the European Union (2023, p.2)

...the continuous cycle of conflict, violence and tensions has undermined the talent, creativity and entrepreneurship of its people and prevented the region from benefiting from its enormous potential in terms of biodiversity, tropical forests, water and agricultural assets, and raw material deposits”. The Council further states that “... the intensification of armed conflict in Eastern DRC, political instability and cyclical bilateral tensions in the region, bear testimony to the tragic human cost that will continue to be paid if lasting and comprehensive peace is not achieved. The continued instability has resulted in one of the world’s worst and longest humanitarian crises and leaves the region open to the risk of becoming a stronghold for domestic and international terrorism and transnational criminal networks.

Conflicts in the Great Lakes region are driven by multiple and complex factors (ACCORD, 2016; Council of the European Union, 2023). These include inequitable access to state and natural resources, a lack of equal opportunities to access political power and the proliferation of small arms are just a few of the factors that perpetuate conflict in the region. Often, these issues underlie actual or perceived inequalities and grievances between identity groups, which can lead to, among other outcomes, the violent expression of these grievances (ACCORD, 2016; Council of the European Union, 2023). The epicenter of conflicts in the Great Lakes region is the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Democratic Republic of Congo is home to one of the world’s largest and worst humanitarian crisis. Since march 2022, While violence is concentrated in the eastern provinces of the DRC, neighboring conflicts have impacted regional peace and security. The joint Congolese and Ugandan military force under Operation Shujaa in Ituri and North Kivu provinces has yet to bring an end to violence carried out by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), especially against civilians. Meanwhile, Burundian forces are fighting against the March 23 Movement (M23) and Rwandan military forces (RDF) in the DRC and further operations against Burundian rebel groups that operate from South Kivu province. The DRC tends to rank high on ACLED’s conflict index over both local and regional tensions, with more turbulent and localized political violence driving the conflict in Burundi and Uganda. While Rwanda has long been considered stable, the offensive into the DRC led Congolese forces to launch retaliatory artillery strikes into Rwanda and may destabilize western areas of the country (ACLED, 2026).

The persistent conflict in the Great Lakes region has been driven by military forces, foreign-backed armed groups, rebel movements, and local militias. Since the re-emergence of the M23 in 2021, it has become the most violent group in the Great Lakes region. The M23 receives support from the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) whose soldiers often fight alongside the M23 and provide the rebels with advanced weapons (ACLED, 2024). The ADF, an armed group operating in the eastern DRC and Uganda with reported ties to the Islamic State, has consistently carried out the most violence toward civilians in the Great Lakes. The ADF also remains a threat to Uganda, with a long history of cross-border violence. When confronting various threats, Congolese military forces (FARDC) have received support from numerous armed groups, bilateral military forces, and multilateral troops. Notably, the FARDC has drawn upon the Wazalendo coalition, a loose association of militias aligned with the Congolese military that initially emerged as localized youth self-defense groups (ACLED, 2024; 2026).

Imperialist Tendencies in EU's Peacebuilding in the Great Lakes Region

As earlier noted, ideationally, institutionally, and internationally, EU peacebuilding frameworks are concerned conflict prevention, conflict management and post-conflict peacebuilding in Africa. However, in the Great Lakes region, the EU has been more concerned and committed to improving mineral governance in the Great Lakes region. To this end, the EU has come up with a number of policy frameworks that are tailored towards economic cooperation in mineral extraction and trade rather than peace, security and development. As Fernandes (2025, p16) rightly pointed out:

The EU's strategic interest in trading with the Great Lakes region revolves around raw materials. There are several contemporary reasons that make the States of the great Lakes region and their mineral endowments a particular attractive and strategic partner for the EU.

Fernandes (2025) advances three reasons for the EU's resource imperialism in the Great Lakes region. The first is the Russo-Ukrainian war which started in 2022, intensifying tensions in the region and cutting-off the EU from its European supply of raw materials. Faced by this geopolitical debacle, the EU is scrambling to secure alternative sources of raw materials, and is generally committed to the diversification of its sources of raw materials. Given the Great Lakes' enormous natural resource endowments, it has enticed the EU's efforts in resource diversification and acquisition (Fernandes, 2025). Second, the EU is undergoing an energy transition, following the exhaustion of its fossil fuels. The depletion of energy has dragged the EU into energy dependence. Meanwhile, Africa still holds enormous reserves of fossil fuels and minerals. The abundance of raw materials in the Great lakes makes it crucial and ideal place for EU. The great Lakes has therefore, offered a viable economic opportunity for the EU to attain its green energy agenda through accessibility and supply of raw materials. The EU is pursuing this agenda through the Global Gate Way initiative which is working to scale up cooperation on efforts to fight climate change and establish sustainable raw materials supply chains.

The third driving force of EU imperialist project in the Great Lakes region is that EU is facing great power competition from Asia and North America in the evolving international political economy. Traditionally, the United States, Japan and the EU were the only significant actors on the global stage. Today, China, India, and Canada, alongside other emerging economies from the Middle East (the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia), and Asia (Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia) have arrived on the global scene. The global influence of China has grown in the last decade (Murphy, 2022; Fernandes, 2025). In the Great Lakes region, China has become a dominant international actor, especially in the extractive economic sector. The China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) is historically, the earliest investor in the Sudanese oil and gas sector. China's Zijin Mining, jointly operated with the Canadian Ivanhoe Mines operates the massive Kamo-Kakula Copper Complex in DRC. The Chinese CMOC Group, the world's largest cobalt producer operates massive assets such as the Tenke Fungurume and Kisanfu Mines in DRC. In Zambia, the China Non-ferrous Metal Mining Group has dominated assets in the Chambishi Copper Mine. China's CNOOC runs the upstream development of the Kingfisher oil field near lake Albert in Uganda. Small-scale Chinese and Lebanese syndicates also operate in Burundi's diamond extractive sector.

The United States is also present in the extractive sector in the Great lakes Region. The United States international oil companies have heavily invested in the Great Lakes Region. Chevron has heavily invested in the Angolan oil sector. It operates major concessions offshore through its subsidiary, the Cabinda Gulf Oil Company (CABGOC). Exxon Mobil has also invested in Angolan oil sector. Canada has also invested in the extractive industry in the Great Lakes region. Canadian Barrick Gold operates in Tanzania, Zambia and the DRC. In the DRC, it operates the Kibali Gold Mine in the DRC which ranks as one of the Africa's largest gold producing operations. In Zambia, it operates the large-scale open-pit Lumwama Copper line. In a joint venture, Canadian Alphamin Resources controls high grade Tin operations at the Bisie Mine, also in DRC. Canada's First Quantum Minerals operates the industrial-scale Kansahi and Sentinel Copper Mines in Zambia. As a global economic powerhouse, the EU has also invested in the Great Lakes Region. France's Total Energies is the largest deep-water offshore oil investor in Angola. Azure Energy, a joint venture between the United Kingdom and Italy is another major oil sector investor in Angola. The United Kingdom's Petrol-Diamonds and Shell have also invested in Tanzania. The UK's Gemfields, is the worlds larges single producer of Emeralds in Zambia. India's ONGC and Petronas (Joint venture with Malaysia) operate in Sudan's oil sector. The implication is that the

scramble for raw materials is taking place in the Great Lakes region. The EU, China and the United States all need raw materials to drive their industrial production, economic dominance and global hegemony. What is happening in the region is a new scramble for economic domination by the great powers. Therefore, the region has become a key battleground for the EU to confront systematic geopolitical rivals such as the United States, China, Canada and India (Fernandes, 2025).

In pursuit of its imperialist project, the EU embarked on the legalization of its operations by passing a Conflict Minerals Regulation (CMR) Act in 2017 which came into effect in 2021. It is paradoxical that the EU legislated on Minerals in the Great Lakes region which it does not own. The CMR is similar to the Dodd-Frank Section 1502 of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Due diligence for Conflict Minerals (Fernandes, 2025). The Conflict Minerals Regulation requires all EU-based importers of 3Ts and gold originating from conflict-affected and high-risk areas are to identify and mitigate risks in their supply chain by implementing the “Due Diligence Guidelines” of the OECD (International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, n.d). Building on the CMR, the EU has formally adopted its corporate sustainability Due Diligence Directive. The use of the term “conflict minerals” is a further reflection of the economic and natural resource imperialism of the EU in the region. The thrust of all Due diligence guidelines in the Great Lakes region is to mandate businesses to pay closer attention to their mineral supply chains and the origins of the materials that make up their products. Most of the due diligence guidelines are focused on the upstream of the supply chain with the aim of improving due diligence and traceability of minerals at mining sites to establish the conflict-free origin of minerals. In February, 2023, the EU introduced the renewed EU Great Lakes Strategy (Council of the European Union, 2023).

Building on the priorities, results, and lessons learned from the 2013 EU Strategic Framework for the Great Lakes Region, the EU introduced the renewed strategy 2023; a regional integrated approach that is action-oriented, focusing on where the EU can bring added-value to the Great Lakes region. The policy focus and main objective of the 2013 strategic framework is the promotion of peace, democracy, and sustainable development in the region by addressing the root causes of insecurity (International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, n.d). Pursuant to the renewed Great lakes Strategy 2023, the EU entered into individual trade agreements with countries in the region. The EU has signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the DRC, Zambia and Rwanda. The MOU with DRC was established on 25th October, 2023, while that with Rwanda was signed in February 2024. All the trade agreements have tied to EU’s raw materials acquisition from the Great Lakes region rather than conflict prevention.

There is also the EU’s Raw Minerals Act which came into being in march 2023. Like the previous EU frameworks for the great Lakes region, the priority is not on conflict prevention, crisis management or security and development nexus. The regulation ensures the EU has access to a sustainable supply of critical raw materials by streamlining permits and access to finance for critical raw material projects in the EU and third-party countries (International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, n.d). The EU introduced the Global Gateway in October 2023. In line with the EU Raw Minerals Act, the EU signed a strategic partnership agreement with DRC and Zambia to support sustainable raw materials value chains. The agreement supports the development of the Lobito Corridor, a main railway to regional and global markets for critical minerals such as cobalt (International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, n.d). The framework on Peace and Security in the Great Lakes Region was introduced in November 2023. The framework provided for funding for a new, four-year project to build the capacity of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and its Member States to address artisanal mineral flows and harness their potential as drivers for economic and social development, as well as stability and security. A provisional agreement reached on the proposed regulation that would require companies to implement practices to mitigate human rights violations and negative environmental impacts in their supply chains. It goes further than previous reporting requirements, by mandating companies demonstrate risk mitigation (International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (n.d).

It is to be noted that more than two years after the implementation of the European Union's (EU) renewed strategy for the Great Lakes, the Region is still embroiled in a deep crisis with complex political, security, and humanitarian dimensions (Fernandes, 2025; European Central Africa Network, 2025). Current EU negotiations with the Africa Union (AU), the ICGLR, and individual countries are dominated by international and political actors, limiting ownership by local actors, who are directly affected by the crisis in the region, and in particular,

the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (European Central Africa Network, 2025). Bilateral or transactional agreements, such as those in Washington or Doha, remain focused on short-term political and economic compromises that do not consider regional complexities, the root causes of conflict, and cross-border dynamics that lie at the heart of intractability of instability in the Great Lakes Region (European Central Africa Network, 2025). International agreements such as the Washington and Doha agreements have suffered from complex architecture and a lack of legitimacy due to a top-down approach, which weakens their legitimacy and their ability to propose comprehensive solutions adapted to local and regional realities, as well as their implementation on the ground, risking the reproduction of existing conflict patterns. The multiplicity of initiatives and the lack of coordination between different levels further accentuate this gap between decisions taken “from above” and local realities (European Central Africa Network, 2025). In its Great Lakes Strategy and through the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), the EU has placed responsible management of natural resources and securing supply chains at the heart of its strategic priorities in the Region (European Central Africa Network, 2025).

The scramble for economic resources is concentrated in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The EU is therefore lackadaisical about conflict prevention. The EU utilizes peacebuilding as a mechanism for protecting the economic interests of its member states and their multinational corporations in the extractive sector of the Great Lakes region. It is using conflicts as a means of gaining access to critical raw materials needed for industrial production. By tagging minerals as “conflict minerals” in the Great Lakes region, the EU has tacitly admitted that conflicts are inescapable means of resource extraction in the region. Civil Wars and conflicts are the enablers of the new scramble for natural resources in Africa. African States have continued to suffer all kinds of conflicts because protracted conflicts are “business enterprises” for most political elites in resource extractive states. Thus, political elites are unwilling to give up the benefits that are often derived from the profiteering of conflicts and natural resources.

CONCLUSION

The Great Lakes region has been trapped in protracted conflicts rooted in the scramble for the region’s vast natural resources, especially oil and gas, cobalt, coltan, copper, diamonds, gold, and 3T minerals, minerals. Persistent conflicts have underpinned unprecedented humanitarian crisis and undercut the prospects for development. The EU has been involved in the peacebuilding process in the Great Lakes region as a conflict prevention actor. Through an array of policy frameworks, the EU has established a normative basis for its conflict prevention in Africa. The normative architecture focuses on promotion of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, security sector reforms, delivery of humanitarian aid, among others. Generally, conflict prevention has been justified by the EU as a means of securing a peaceful Africa and catalyzing development. In reality however, the EU is not operating as international conflict prevention and crisis management actor.

While the EU is busy talking about peacebuilding in the Great Lakes, the region, including in places where the EU has heavily invested are boiling in conflicts. The DRC, Rwanda, Burundi, and Sudan are still embroiled in conflicts. Localized conflicts are also prevalent in the Central African Republic, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. Rather than carryout conflict prevention and crisis management, the EU has instead focused on promoting European values and handling post-conflict peacebuilding activities. The Great Lakes region is therefore trapped in the paradoxical existentiality whereby peacebuilding has been accompanied by the proliferation of state-based conflicts with multifaceted socioeconomic consequences. Preventive diplomacy is eluding the EU because of a number of factors including the neglect of early warning signals, and inadequate funding of preventive diplomacy. The persistence of fragility in resource rich countries is part of the criminalization of the state which is profiting political elites and the vested interests of the super powers in their new scramble for extractive resources and the EU’s marketing of arms in Africa. EU’s preventive diplomacy has not been intentioned to achieve peace but to rather further the economic interests of the super powers and other developed through new resource extraction that is empowering the fourth industrial revolution and the marketing of arms. The persistence of conflict there opens up opportunity for the political elite in extractive resource states and the competing foreign powers to penetrate communities and regions for the purposes of resource extraction.

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