

Rwanda seeks political gains from peacekeeping

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Rwanda has gone from being the host of a peacekeeping mission to one of the world's leading contributors to peacekeeping

Rwanda on July 9 deployed around 1,000 military and police personnel to Mozambique's conflict-affected Cabo Delgado Province. The troops will engage in "combat and security" operations against local jihadists in support of Mozambique's government, similar to a recent bilateral deployment to support government operations against rebels in the Central African Republic (CAR) since last December.



Rwandan soldiers board a plane for Mozambique, where they are deploying to fight jihadists, July 10 (Xinhua/Shutterstock)

What next

Rwanda's commitment to overseas military deployments blends a sense of solidarity based on Kigali's own experience of domestic crisis with a pragmatic sense of national interest -- particularly in terms of deflecting criticism of its own human rights record. As such, Kigali is likely to continue and expand its participation in such missions, which will further entrench its image as a reliable and committed partner on regional security issues.

Subsidiary Impacts

- Rwanda's willingness to use its military to curb regional instability will make it a key interlocutor for external powers engaged in Africa.
- Although participation in peacekeeping brings financial recompense, it is questionable whether this offsets the costs of such missions.
- Rwandan forces have sometimes drawn praise for going beyond their mandates to protect civilians, which further encourages such behaviour.

Analysis

Global peacekeeping and military stabilisation missions persistently face deficits in generating the necessary personnel and capacities to secure the outcomes for which they were created.

Moreover, since the bloody debacle that saw 19 US soldiers killed in the infamous 'Battle of Mogadishu' in 1993, appetite for multilateral military deployments among countries in the developed 'global north' has declined dramatically -- except in cases where a clear national interest is perceived to be at play.

Perhaps nowhere was this reality more keenly felt than in Rwanda, where, as the 1994 genocide unfolded, international forces not only stood by, but were actually withdrawn from an existing UN peacekeeping mission in the country, which was left with only a small, token force while up to 1 million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed by extremists within a hundred-day period.

The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a mostly diaspora-based Tutsi rebel movement under the leadership of future President Paul Kagame, ultimately ended the genocide after invading from neighbouring Uganda.

This experience of abandonment and self-help illustrated to the new RPF government (which still rules Rwanda today) the importance of securing its own security interests rather than relying upon international assistance.

Rwanda's genocide experience has shaped its external security posture

Peacekeeping powerhouse

The influence of the genocide on Rwanda's external security policy has manifested in different ways.

Most immediately, the aftermath of the genocide saw Rwandan security forces pursue former genocidaires into neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and become a primary actor in (according to many accounts, a major catalyst for) the Congolese civil wars (1996-2003).

These actions were a direct pursuit of Rwandan security interests, and generated significant international condemnation, with Kigali accused of perpetrating serious abuses -- even genocide -- against Hutu refugees and Congolese civilians, seriously destabilising eastern DRC in the process.

Kigali has never abandoned this element to its overseas engagements -- indeed, there are persistent rumours that Rwandan combat troops remain clandestinely deployed in eastern DRC (see [CONGO-KINSHASA: Tshisekedi looks for help in the east](#) - November 13, 2019).

However, it has also massively expanded its participation in less controversial forms of overseas military engagement -- notably peacekeeping operations aimed at preventing other societies from facing societal collapse or genocide.

Despite the country's diminutive size, it has become the world's fifth-largest troop contributor to UN peacekeeping, deploying to multiple missions, including in CAR, Darfur, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, South Sudan and Haiti (the only mission Rwanda has contributed to outside Africa).

Mixed motives

Although Kigali tends to justify its peacekeeping contributions in terms of support for multilateralism, the reasons for its participation vary.

Certainly, there is an element of solidarity to Rwanda's peacekeeping policy. Kagame has been highly active in African affairs and a strong champion of the African Union's mantra of 'African solutions for African problems' -- which represents an extension of Rwanda's genocide-era lesson on the importance of self-reliance in resolving security problems.

Relatedly, the Rwandan Defence Force (RDF) contains many soldiers and officers who fought to stop the 1994 genocide and their experiences have greatly impacted their perceptions of the importance of preventing future genocides in Rwanda and elsewhere.

Moreover, Rwanda has been a major rhetorical champion of the 2015 Kigali Principles on the Protection of Civilians, which stress the importance of developing the skills of peacekeepers to improve their readiness to combat insecurity.

This is important for Rwanda's military, as it reflects the RPF's experiences with underequipped and ill-trained peacekeepers during the 1994 genocide. It has also allowed Rwanda to attract US, UK and other military training that has boosted Rwanda's own military capabilities.

Indeed, Rwanda's extensive participation in peacekeeping also reflects pragmatic self-interest.

One notable rationale is the political capital that peacekeeping engagement can generate vis-a-vis the global north. Given the deficit in broader military capacities available to participate in peacekeeping, Rwanda's well-equipped, well-motivated and experienced military and police components are particularly highly valued.

This can help to offset broader international criticisms of Rwanda's domestic democratic and human

rights deficits, or the more controversial aspects of its foreign policy -- including accusations of military aggression and espionage abroad (see [RWANDA: Crackdown may spill across borders - October 3, 2019](#)).

Rwanda views peacekeeping as a useful means to offset international criticism

At times, Kigali has even tried to leverage this directly, by threatening to curtail its peacekeeping activities should it face international censure on other issues, though this policy has had mixed results.

A final reason for Rwanda's commitment to peacekeeping stems from a belief in the importance of promoting regional security in order to secure Rwanda's own state and economic security.

A central belief underpinning Rwandan security policy is that instability within East or Central Africa can have a knock-on impact upon Rwanda's own security and development. Akin to the 'domino theory' during the Cold War, the argument is that civil strife in one African country can quickly permeate across the porous borders of others, eventually leading to Rwanda's doorstep.

It is this rationale that helps explain Rwanda's recent offer of troops and police to combat jihadists in Mozambique. Despite Mozambique being around 2,000 kilometres from Rwanda, the concern among Rwandan policymakers is that continued instability may grow beyond just the Cabo Delgado Province to engulf other parts of Mozambique and neighbouring Tanzania and, if left unchecked, possibly the wider region.

Outlook

Through its long-term commitment, Rwanda has come to be seen as a reliable peacekeeping partner. Perhaps more importantly, Rwandan peacekeepers have proven themselves to be effective and capable -- and willing to move beyond passive peacekeeping into more active armed combat roles, something many troop-contributing countries shy away from.

This has helped make Rwanda an indispensable player on the international peacekeeping scene -- and thus to further Rwanda's objectives of improving its international standing and distracting attention from the more controversial elements of its domestic and foreign policy.

Its latest deployments in Mozambique and CAR -- which place Rwandan troops in an active armed combat role in bilateral support of governments with questionable human rights records -- deviate from this paradigm in important ways and risk being more controversial than more traditional peacekeeping roles.

Nevertheless, such deployments help to promote goodwill among other African states, while the desire to remain in a backseat role in such crises means Western criticisms of Rwanda's actions will likely remain muted.