

## AFRICA

# Rethinking Alliances: France, Rwanda, and the Future of Regional Power Dynamics

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The international order has undergone a period of transition in recent years. Regional contexts are gaining relevance and autonomy. As a result, local actors have forced global actors to reposition themselves regionally. Given this context, liberal principles and values are facing more challenges. And so are the countries that have promoted them for years. Western actors are therefore called upon to rethink their approaches and agendas in regional and continental contexts such as Africa. An attempt to respond to some of these challenges seems to be the case of the France-Rwanda partnership. An example that could, over time, be taken up by other Western actors.

In March, SADC (Southern African Development Community) decided not to renew the SAMIN (Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique) mission in Mozambique. The multinational regional force, which has been deployed since July 2021 to combat insurgency in the Cabo Delgado region, will leave the country by July 15. Since 2017, the northern region of Mozambique, known for its significant natural resources, has been experiencing deep instability.

In addition to gas, the region is rich in graphite, estimated to be 30 percent of the world's reserves. Sparked by local socio-economic reasons, the insurgency first took on a sectarian dimension under the leadership of the ASWJ (Al Sunnah wa Jama'ah) group. After early offensive successes, particularly in Palma and Mocimboao de Praia, the ASWJ joined global jihadism. The insurgent group rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Mozambique (ISM). After initial progress by the SADC multinational contingent, the ISM revisited its strategy.

Organized into smaller groups, Islamist militants raised the level of violence by targeting civilians and military personnel. The use of small cells allowed the ISM to carry out simultaneous actions in different areas, making it difficult for security forces to intervene preventively. Since the fall of 2023, the insurgents have been gaining momentum for several months and are gradually regaining control of several previously liberated areas. As a result, the news of the withdrawal of SADC troops has caused confusion and anxiety.

A few weeks later, the French Foreign Minister met with his Rwandan counterpart and signed a €400 million development partnership agreement. The April meeting between the two ministers indicated the strategic convergence between Kigali and Paris. Following President Macron's visit in May 2021, relations between the two countries entered a new era. At the time, the French president acknowledged Paris' responsibility during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Since 2021, relations between Paris and Kigali have become increasingly close and operational, especially in crisis and instability scenario like Mozambique.

The two unrelated news stories are connected. Rwanda has long been involved in the Cabo Delgado insurgency through bilateral agreements with a contingent of over 1,000 troops, which was deployed at the same time as the SADC. The ability of RDF units in the CAR to combat armed guerrilla warfare prompted Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi to request assistance from Kigali. Paris, which has many interests in Cabo Delgado, encouraged the Rwandan intervention.

French energy giant TotalEnergies launched an 18 billion euro project to export LNG from Mozambique. The plan, known as LNG Mozambique, was suspended in early 2021 due to jihadist violence around the facilities. The French company itself had evacuated some 3,000 employees from the Afungi site. The facilities, owned by TotalEnergy, became a base of operations for Rwandan troops shortly after the evacuation. Paris also lobbied its European partners on behalf of the Rwandan initiative, convincing them of the operation's value. As a result, the EU provided economic support to the operation through the European Peace Facility during the three years of RDF troop deployment in Cabo Delgado.

Rwanda's role in the continent-wide security sector and its relationship with France necessitate reflection concerning the future of Africa's security architecture and the efforts by Western players to reshape their continental agenda. The situation in Mozambique indicates a trend that is spreading across the continent. Collaborating with African stakeholders in an international and regional context unfavorable to Western initiatives could be an alternative, but it comes with challenges and contradictions.

The Kigali-Paris relationship is based on several factors that make it a win-win partnership. Paris' decision to strengthen its tie with an actor relevant for the African security should not be read solely in the context of reducing French presence in Africa. Indeed, the transformations at the global level are the first factor to be considered. For more than a decade, the liberal international order (LIO) has been declining. While many doubts remain about the future configuration -whether it will return to multipolarism, a new bipolarism, or a pax sinica- most scholars agree that the international order is passing through a transitional phase. Disruptions and various manifestations of the current international (dis-)order mark this phase. One indication is the succession of emergencies: 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis, the Arab uprisings, COVID-19, the Ukraine war, and Gaza.

Faced with such a trend, traditional Western players are in a difficult position to make decisions. This situation is particularly evident in the case of the United States. Washington finds itself in the difficult position of balancing available resources and its engagement in global affairs without neglecting its strategic priorities. Other actors, such as the United Kingdom and France, face the same dilemma on a smaller scale. The latter, in particular, is called upon to completely rethink its relationship with Africa.

However, the need to reformulate Paris' agenda for Africa runs against another dynamic that characterizes global disorder: the growing cleavage between the West and the Rest. Western actors are increasingly grappling with their responsibilities and the self-righteous attitudes of the past decades and are increasingly contested by the regional states. Widespread anti-Western sentiment is not a new phenomenon. It has deeper roots in what [Hedley Bull](#) called "the revolt against the West". In the 1990s, contestation of the legacies of Western influence (colonialism, liberal development model) emerged in the Global South. The nature, object, and

scope of the contestation have changed in recent years.

Nowadays, rulers and public spaces in many Global South states criticize the West's claim to speak for everyone while forgetting different historical memories. In the African context, local rulers and other extra-regional actors (Russia and China) undoubtedly fuel these popular sentiments for their interests.

Another dynamic marking the transitional phase of the international order is the reversal of the relationship between the regional and global dimensions. For many years, global trends shaped regional events. Today, however, regional dynamics are increasingly generating global implications. This reversed relationship is partially due to the complex structure that regional complexes have developed and taken on. Regional complexes have multiple hierarchies that may not reflect global power. Instead, these hierarchies foster the emergence of asymmetric relationships. Extra-regional players enjoy greater economic and military power, but they cannot constrain the behavior and decisions of regional ones. Indeed, local stakeholders demonstrate that they know how to use international (dis-)order to their advantage, exploiting external competition to pursue their regional and domestic interests. The conflict in Tigray and the civil war in Sudan are two recent cases that illustrate this dynamic. In the first case, Western states failed to stop the conflict, even though the EU and the US are two of Ethiopia's most important donors. In the second case, Washington and Saudi Arabia's mediation efforts were unsuccessful despite having considerable diplomatic and economic leverage on Khartoum. In both cases, local actors have shown that they resist external pressure by seeking support from competing countries. In the first case, Addis Ababa found diplomatic support from China and Russia and military support from Turkey and the UAE. In the case of Sudan, on the other hand, the warring parties have strengthened their ties with the UAE, Iran, and Russia.

Relations between France and Rwanda must be contextualized within this frame. Paris is being urged to reduce its presence on the African continent. The string of coups and regime changes in the Sahel has dealt another blow to French influence in the region, undermining its popularity throughout the continent. As a result, in some key African regions, including Eastern Africa, Paris has had to find a new way to project and protect its strategic interests. France considers Cabo Delgado energy plant as a national interest issue. Safeguarding the investment

in Mozambique by sending military troops – whether a French or a European contingent- would have high political costs. Therefore, Rwanda pro-active military diplomacy seemed to be an alternative. In other words, Paris’ needs have met Kigali’s ones. The small African country has embarked on a foreign policy based on its capabilities to be used as a bargaining chip to overcome structural weaknesses. Specifically, the Kigali government wants to emancipate itself from a condition of external dependence.

Despite its geostrategic location in the Great Rift Valley at the convergence of the Great Lakes region and East Africa, Rwanda is poor in natural resources. Rwanda’s greatest asset is the RDF and its ability to operate in conflict and crisis contexts. Many current RDF officers fought in the Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA). The experience gained during the civil war years allows the RDF today to have excellent knowledge and skills in asymmetric warfare. As a result, the Rwandan government has chosen to make military diplomacy the main instrument of its foreign policy. Hence, Kigali’s decision to pursue a proactive Africa policy through participation in multilateral and, more recently, bilateral operations as part of a deliberate foreign policy strategy.

Commitment in peacekeeping missions has increased Rwanda’s popularity at the continental and international levels. Nowadays, Rwanda presents itself in Africa and beyond as the continent’s security provider. The regime under President Kagame’s leadership has capitalized in various ways. Kagame is now one of the most influential African leaders. The president has used military diplomacy to rebuild the country’s brand. He employs pan-Africanist rhetoric based on the tragic experience of genocide, highlighting Rwanda’s responsibility to prevent such atrocities from happening again. Further, Rwanda is gaining influence within regional bodies, agencies, and the African Union.

On a political level, Rwanda has capitalized on all continental institutions. The position of Rwandan officials within African institutions is far beyond what the size of the country would warrant. The gains are not just political. Rwanda’s activism in the security sector has enabled new strategic and economic partnerships with regional actors. It pursues a strategy of regional and continental economic integration to mitigate the disadvantages of its geographical position and its dependence on extra-regional donors. A strategy that is part of the Agaciro

project. The Agaciro Development Fund (AgDF) is Rwanda's sovereign wealth fund, established in 2012 to promote economic and social development. Created to raise funds for Rwanda, the AgDF soon became an important tool for the country's economic self-sufficiency. The Agaciro project also has a significant symbolic value. Agaciro is a Kinyarwanda word, which can be translated to mean dignity or self-worth, that emphasizes the importance of solidarity in the face of external threats.

The Franco-Rwandan partnership and the use of RDF in Cabo Delgado have therefore outlined a kind of new strategy. To protect its interests in Africa, Paris seems to have opted for a sort of leading from behind approach. In other words, France appears to be delegating armies from well-trained African countries to overcome the political costs of a direct intervention.

In addition to Rwanda, another example could be represented by the Chadian troops in the Sahel. Given the widespread of Russian footprint in Central and East Africa, the Rwandan army seems particularly suited to serve as a proxy force for Western players. This strategy raises doubts and contradictions. The first one concerns how Western actors engage with non-democratic regimes. A point of concern that arises the issue of Western double standards. President Kagame's use of troop deployments in multilateral operations has diverted international attention from domestic human rights abuses.

Involvement in stabilization missions in crisis areas has also been used to pressure donors. Faced with the donors' menace to reduce aid because of the many violations in the field of human rights, the Kigali government threatens to withdraw its troops from multilateral missions. Strengthening ties with Western partners will likely worsen this trend. Rwanda's involvement in the DRC is another primary concern. The Congolese government and various international organizations accuse Kigali of backing the March 23 Movement (M23). M23 is an armed group, which operates along the Rwanda-DRC eastern border. Rwanda's support is seen as a destabilizing factor and is likely to worsen the situation around the city of Goma. Rwanda's links to the M23 have embarrassed France and other EU member states. Until last year, Paris' position was ambiguous. Often, the issue was treated as an afterthought, with cautious invitations to avoid interfering in the DRC's internal affairs. Over the past 12 months, however, French attitude has changed. Paris has formally asked Kigali to stop supporting the

M23 and to withdraw all Rwandan fighters from the Congolese territory. Developments on the ground triggered the change in French attitudes. After the withdrawal of the EAC troops (December 2023), the level of violence in the clashes around Goma escalated. This trend is likely to create a cycle of widespread violence throughout the country as IDPs increase and, more importantly, complicate the eventual start of negotiations. However, France has never openly condemned Rwanda for the sake of their strategic partnership. A heightened interest in maintaining good relations with Kigali is behind the weak French stance.

The Franco-Rwandan case is emblematic of some global trends. Above all, it highlights the contradictions of the Western approach to the rest of the world. One factor contributing to the weakening of the Liberal International Order (LIO) is the decline of liberal values and principles in the behavior of the states that purport to promote them globally. Indeed, maintaining and advancing national interests often conflicts with promoting and upholding liberal democratic principles. Therefore, cases such as the Franco-Rwandan partnership pose a dilemma for Western players: to what extent is it acceptable for democratic states to sacrifice some basic principles in the name of strategic interests? On the answers that Western actors give to this question will depend much of the future of relations with African countries and of the international order itself.

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