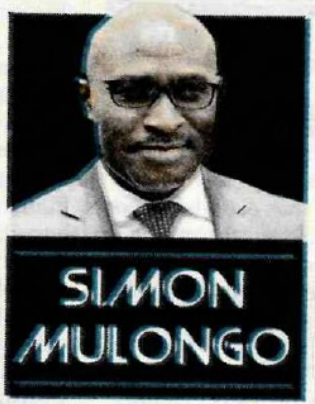
Museveni's moment to reset East Africa's strategic future



When President Yoweri Museveni assumed the rotating chairmanship of the East African Community (EAC) on March 7, at the Summit of Heads of State in Arusha, it marked an important moment for the regional bloc. The EAC is now one of Africa's largest regional organisations, bringing together eight member states with nearly 330 million people and a collective GDP exceeding $320b.

Expansion has also exposed the community to new pressures. Armed conflicts along its borders, financial strains within regional institutions and competing national interests are testing whether the EAC can act with unity and strategic clarity.

The most immediate challenge remains the conflict in eastern DR Congo. On December 4, 2025, in Washington, D.C, President Félix Tshisekedi and Rwanda's President Paul Kagame signed the Washington Accords, brokered by Washington, in an attempt to ease tensions and curb the Rwanda-linked M23 rebel movement. Yet the agreement quickly came under strain. On March 2, this year, the US imposed sanctions on elements of the Rwandan Defence Force after M23 fighters captured the strategic city of Uvira, widely viewed as a violation of the peace deal. Renewed hostilities emerged less than three months after the accord was signed.

The conflict is driven by deeper structural factors. Eastern DR Congo hosts over 130 armed groups, while the region contains deposits believed to represent around 60% of global cobalt reserves, alongside large shares of coltan and other minerals critical to global technology industries.

The humanitarian consequences are severe. More than seven million people are internally displaced in the DR Congo, while refugee flows affect neighbouring Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania.

For the EAC, the DR Congo crisis is therefore a direct regional security concern. Museveni's leadership could move beyond traditional summit diplomacy by establishing an EAC Strategic Operations Forum, bringing together defence chiefs, intelligence leaders and foreign ministers regularly. This would allow member states to share intelligence, monitor ceasefire violations and co-ordinate responses to insurgent movements. Alongside this, the community could introduce a regional compliance mechanism where support for proxy armed groups or breaches of peace agreements trigger co-ordinated diplomatic or economic consequences.

A second challenge lies in South Sudan, where the peace process remains fragile. The revitalised agreement on the resolution of the conflict in South Sudan, signed on September 12, 2018 in Addis Ababa, created a framework for political transition. Yet instability persists.

In the 17 days leading to March 5, 2026, reports indicated more than 160 civilian deaths, including 139 people killed on March 1, during attacks linked to fighters from the Bul Nuer community. Between March 7-9, thousands fled Akobo county in Jonglei State after military evacuation orders triggered widespread displacement.

South Sudan's instability has wider implications. The country produces about 150,000 barrels of oil per day, exported through pipelines crossing Sudan. Disruptions, therefore, affect regional energy flows and economic stability. Uganda's military deployment in the country, defended publicly on March 10, as a lawful intervention that protected civilians, illustrates how closely national and regional security interests are linked.

To address this, the EAC could support joint stabilisation corridors along volatile border areas linking South Sudan, Uganda and Kenya. These corridors would combine co-ordinated patrols, humanitarian access routes and protected cross-border markets, helping sustain local economies while limiting the operational space available to armed groups.

The regional security environment is further complicated by the ongoing war in Sudan. On October 31, 2025, the African Union appointed Museveni to support mediation efforts between the Sudanese Armed Forces led by Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. By March 5, the conflict had lasted more than 1,050 days, producing one of the world's most serious humanitarian crises. Analysts warn that instability could spread across the Red Sea and Horn of Africa corridor, affecting trade routes and maritime security.

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