

The International System and the Peace Map for Africa's Great Lakes Region (AGLR)

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The African continent habituated with volatile conflicts and protracted violence, be it intra-state or inter-state is also acquainted with multi-ethnic tensions breeding different militias. The trend, although not new, is the expanding phenomenon of Jihadism and general terrorism. Some of these and other forms of conflicts summarize the geopolitics of Africa's Great Lakes Region (AGLR). The bloodbath wherein the subregion engrosses itself is not solely guided by political considerations. Both endogenous and exogenous capitalist economic profit have stirred the system while ethnic politics and politics on ethnic leanings have amplified the scenario. The endeavors of both the international community and regional blocs appear deficient – a consequence of the frailty of the UN system and general multilateralism. Peace is possible for AGLR when humanity is placed over the tidal wave of capitalist profit, patriotism over toxic ethnicity and respect is accorded to international jurisprudence emblemized by the *bona fide* principle of *pacta sunt Servanda*, without neglecting the capacity of the youth and peace education.

Keywords: The International System, Africa's Great Lakes Region, Peace Map, toxic ethnicity, *Pacta sunt Servanda*, *bona fide*, illicit economies, capitalist profit, peace education

Introduction

The African Union (AU) peace and security program that 2017 strategic document styled the “AU Master Roadmap” (AUMR) highlights practical steps of silencing the guns in Africa by 2020. The situation appears deceptive; the guns keep smoking simply in the manner of the continent whose history is no stranger to “bloodbaths”. Africa's Great Lakes Region (AGLR) is a perfect historical narrative of a region soaked in blood oozing from interstate and intrastate rivalry.

A rapid scan of the region chronicles the contest to emerge from the shackles of a colonial past, yet relapses into wars stemming from a complex web of intersecting ethno-political and economic motives among diverse armed groups vying for dominance and control. The four main countries—the DRC, Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda, have been involved in one conflict or another. The DRC alone is a circus for over 120 armed groups. The subregional dissensions synopsizes the ailing international system verified in the deficiency in the application of legal frameworks. Imagine the number of UN peacekeeping missions in the subregion, and to what end? The termination of international and regional peacekeeping missions speaks of a failure in regionalism and betrayal of diplomacy.

Architecting for Regional Peace

The truth inserted within the space-time continuum does not only lie in access to land, mineral resources, and power mongering, but also governance and ethnic inclinations are contextual and instrumentalizing factors within the wider gamut of strivings in the subregion. If historical facts are anything to go by, then the colonial and the immediate post-colonial periods are dynamics to be analyzed for a sustainable solution. The colonial masters' system and choice of governance right up to the period of the Mandate of the League of Nations, especially the division of ethnic groups and the crisscrossing of borders and the establishment of new settlements across territories is a shadow of the colonial powers and an undeniable reality, one which in spite of the positives has equally "rewarded" the continent with instability and a difficult geopolitical terrain. Such a geopolitical climate requires perfect geostrategy to chart the way for peace. This must begin with a correct understanding of how ethnicity should be regarded vis-a-vis nationality.

Ethnic Politics and Politics on Ethnic Leanings

Interconnectivity and diversity—a marked characteristic of the geopolitics of AGLR which could be thought of as a rich celebration of unity in diversity, are inversely a substrate for complex and interconnected conflicts. Come to think of armed groups, rebel factions, and local militias, some that enjoy foreign aid all jostling in ethnic tensions and local economic competition for agricultural and mineral resources (IPIS, ASSODIP, and DIIS, 2024, p. 5).

African politics, thriving on tribal and ethnic basis, eclipses the spirit of nationalism creating an acute problematic of national solidarity and "togetherness". This is toxic ethnocentrism which has elsewhere produced ethno-political conflicts at times with ramifications for regional security as verified in AGLR. The failure of unity in diversity has procured intolerance with its defining characteristics of conflict, political instability, and ethnic tensions. Remember the Rwandan genocide. DRC on her part has experienced one of the opaqueness pages in the entire history of the subregion. Each armed group is aligned with their community interest, their narrative written in the logic of defending the ethnicity in all ramifications from deprivations (IPIS, ASSODIP, and DIIS, 2024, p. 17). Ethnic politics and politics on ethnic leanings define themselves here as the "protection of minority groups", but the unfortunate fruit is hate speech, sponsored by fabricated narratives, misinformation, and inflammatory rhetoric to the detriment of national patriotism. Weaponized by political actors and armed groups to incite violence, hate speech has deepened communal divides, undermined reconciliation, and destabilized societies. Ethnic fault lines blurring civic and national interests extend shockingly in religious representation. (Gaetan, 2012, pp. 205-218). At this moment, the beauty of those legal tools for combating hate speech: The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, The Rabat Plan of Action, the Beirut Declaration, etc., becomes mental decoration.

Until the African reenkindles the "instincts" of national patriotism and love for the *res publica*, viewing the ethnic group as part of the totality of the State, dedicated to the care of the common good and the respect for human dignity, this negativity will continue to resonate in regional geopolitics to heighten security concerns. This is proof that governance structures obligatorily warrant bolstering. Failure to overcome ethnic divides in this century especially given its bad fruits harvested in genocides and ethnic cleansings is culpable. AGLR ought to navigate the shifting contours of international politics, amid intensifying great power competition, emerging regional alliances, and evolving security architectures instead of capitalizing on unhealthy ethnic bonds. The

fast-evolving global order has regional implications, and this speaks of the strategic imperatives for the subregion in this shifting geopolitical landscape. With the decline of unipolarity and the emergence of multipolar global governance, the rise of regionalism exerts impact on traditional alliances not on ethnic inclinations. The emphasis is on the imperative for States within the subregion to adopt a proactive foreign policy approach, grounded in strategic foresight, regional integration, and global engagement. Ethnocentrism that over-burdens nationalism fails to guarantee security concerns. The principle should be first the *res publica* and the general common good.

Methods aimed at neutralizing hate speech must be rooted in an urgently coordinated-community-centered and transnational approach which promotes dialogue and fosters inclusive cohabitation. It must be a multi-stakeholder approach that does not exclude the youth—that most vulnerable sector of the citizenry, especially in polarized and militarized times given the realities of their disadvantaged and fragile environment. The Great Lakes Region “boasts” a huge size of radicalized families leading to radicalized minors with the negative baggage which carries for the future of the subregion. The vital need to understand and transform such narratives is paramount and effective if youth themselves are empowered to take up the task. Young people must not just be beneficiaries, but key drivers of sustainable change in a subregion “Youth Peace and Security Agenda”. This involves a transforming narrative of youth engagement in cross-national dialogues with their counterparts to rebuild trust strained by years of violence. Unaccompanied by such a foundation and a decisive path the future of the subregion remains fragile.

Capitalism and Illicit Economies

The capitalist system and maybe the western-led imperial structures have become a formidable political instrument in the hands of private interests by dismantling the national peoples of their decision-making power in trade with the aim of guaranteeing the flow of profit. The wars of AGLR, although ethno-politically motivated, are amplified by economic motives often tied to land resources. This is “systematic land plundering disguised as legal operations for the benefit of a handful of military and political actors” (Mararo, *Annuaire 2009-2010*, pp. 201-229). It is a capitalist competition with countries contending for control of natural resources to increase gains in the export chains,¹ coupled with the rich agricultural background of the subregion (Matthysen & Gobbers, 2022, pp. 31-33). This illustrates an unvoiced economic injustice silently consented to and maneuvered by third-party trade partners. What happens when a foreign partner signs a trade deal with a nation that does not have the commodity? It is simple: the rise of illicit economies and organized crime that negate the usefulness of subregional trade accords (Voir Schlindwein, 2023; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022).

What about the silent benefits of the war industry? War is an unparalleled profit opportunity upon the sacrifice of human dignity at the altar of profits. The more guns you hold, the more bullets you fire, the more vehicles you use, the more money flows into the coffers of the arms’ giants. This is the logic in play in the subregion. The arms giants jostle to compete for profits. It is the worst-case scenario of the concentration of opulence, decadence, and an absolute lack of civil virtues culminating in the erosion of human dignity. The message is clear, the style unmistakable: “we can provide arms to armed groups and governments in the Great Lakes so that they fight and kill themselves as long as we can profit”.

¹ ONU (Juin 2023), S/2023/431, op. cit., §176-185; ONU, *Rapport final du groupe d’experts sur la RDC*, S/2020/482, 2 Juin 2020, §61-68.

Architecting peace under these circumstances obligatorily necessitates addressing concerns of both local and international trade. It must be a trade system of international cooperation not exploitation. Africa needs equal opportunities in trade with partners. Such is a way to curb financial asymmetries and pave the way for development. It must address the inalienable rights of human dignity. No wonder, pope Francis had to make that deafening call: “hands off Congo”, a call which receives a stunning lackluster response, an attitude of a “loud silence”, an inaction that has become the perfect example of the creeping sense of impunity that infects both the national and the international political systems with regards to events in AGLR. Someone somewhere must understand and act with the firm conviction that Africa is not a “mine to be exploited” or a “territory to be plundered”.

The Role of Treaties: *Pacta Sunt Servanda*

The skills and strategies shaping diplomacy in the 21st century reveal a deeper sense of the passage from crisis to consensus concretized in accords religiously observed by parties keeping in check the *pacta sunt servanda* principle. It is classified as *ius cogens* that war is no longer an instrument for resolving national and international disputes. Thus, that art of negotiation at the State-to-State level and always with the consciousness that treaties must be kept in *bona fide* becomes a guarantor of the development of initiatives that truly build bridges and create the basis for peacebuilding in different environments.

Peace treaties are the most important source of obligation in international law (Crawford, 2012, p. 30).

Have there not been efforts at peace accords for AGLR? Think of the effort made by the AU, SADC, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), the Nairobi/Luanda processes etc. What is new in the latest DRC-Rwanda Accord brokered by Washington and the DRC-M23 brokered by Doha? Are these enough? It is simple; there is the betrayal of the *bona fide* principle of international jurisprudence that guarantees the faithful respect of treaties. The *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties* entails a certain presumption as to the validity and continuance in force of a treaty given the fact that legally, treaties are enduring instruments and not easily disposed of (Crawford, 2012, p. 377), and States must comply with their obligations in good faith (Aust, 2007, pp. 179-181).

The element of trust—the “basement” for dialogue and international cooperation cannot be overemphasized. The sustained ethnic tensions and mistrust in the said region rupture the strongest accord. This is the case with the resurfacing of the M23 rebels, the closure of the Rwanda-Burundi road etc. There is a better way; start with vision, purpose, and principles for a strategic view of cooperation—get agreement on what you’re putting down as law. This must align with the unique perspective shaped by deep engagement with historical and geopolitical dynamics—the historical processes that formed these countries; the similarities and differences between them; the importance of ethnic groups and their cultural values and legacy is not optional in the analyses of the accords; otherwise, it becomes a hyper-abstract exercise that makes little sense outside the ego of the actors.

Yes, respect for treaties resides always in *bona fide*; the accords in the subregion nonetheless must be able to amplify the moral and political obligation of the international community to confront the legacy of atrocity crimes with honesty and resolve. This fortifies the normative framework for remembrance, justice, and prevention.

But how sustainable is an accord negotiated with the sole interest of extraction and getting privileged access to the precious minerals of a country? These are only piecemeal negotiations we are increasingly seeing with a handful of African countries with Russia, China, EU, USA etc. There is absolutely no point transforming

the war emergency into a commercial contract in the name of accords. This is not diplomacy; it is mineral trading disguised as diplomacy. The message is brutal: *“If you want our protection, pay for it”*.

Peace Education

A peace, based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of the government, is bereft of the capacity of durability. Peace must be set, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind (Engida, 2016, p. 120). Giving children a chance to go to school is giving a country a chance for peace. Peace starts in school and with our common cultural heritage (Engida, 2016, p. 123). Education is not just about learning to read and write, it is about values, and it is about learning to live together. Education is needed to break down stereotypes and strengthen core principles, to combat violence and discrimination (Engida, 2016, p. 121). UNESCO reports that in sub-Saharan Africa 10 million children drop out of primary school every year (surely, the figures have increased with increase in the number of wars). This is a lost generation in the making, and we know how the broken aspirations of youth can be a source of unrest.

Sustainable peace for AGLR necessitates a comprehensive program on peace education, meticulously crafted to target not only the younger generation but also the broader populace. Its capacity to bring to bear the essence of individual and collective human rights and the imperative for universal adherence to these rights lays the foundation for mutual respect and imbues in individuals the frightening truth about war, whereby human civilization stands on the precarious brink of collapse. Thus, friendly dealing with all nations and a sincere regard for the fundamental interrelationship between all people becomes the core principle.

Through the instrumentality of media platforms, culture, and arts with its most potent tools found in music, dance, drama, painting, and sculpture, peace education can reach the nooks and crannies of the subregion (King & Miller, 2006, p. 20). Peace education is not just about sharing teaching materials; it is about erecting a geopolitical protective wall.

Conclusion

Here is a land where children grow up living with blood, not the blood of protected animals under pain of imprisonment, but fellow human beings. It is not just about blood, but about blood spilt by economic injustice and ethnic hate. AGLR is being suffocated by her own sons and daughters together with their foreign agents whose concern is the tidal wave of profits obtained from the region's mineral resources.

Perceptible is the apparent impotence of the international community to halt decades of this carnage, signaling the profound failure of the international community and the numbness of the global coalition network of conscience and therefore undermining the credibility of international law and multilateral institutions. Such impotence creates a political condition in which the denial of responsibility by both national and international actors flourishes and amplifies the tsunami of ambiguities that have taken root over years of nonchalance in the Great Lakes.

This is not only about remembering the past and present of the Great Lakes, but also the future of the subregion. Is there really nothing to do about it genuinely? The time has come for history to rewrite itself and history must be told on its own terms; there needs to be a reawakening of the global conscience to the reaffirmation of humanity, the people must be listened to. Yes, peace is possible for AGLR when we have the right framework and conscientious humanity not just there to milk and cart away the resources of the bleeding region but who have a deep respect for humanity. This will happen when the numb global coalition network of conscience becomes sensible.

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