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## “RWANDA’S EXIT THREAT EXPOSES MOZAMBIQUE’S VULNERABILITIES AND CABO DELGADO’S OPAQUE SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

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despite its vast natural resource wealth, it remains heavily dependent on external actors to ensure both territorial security and the protection of its economic interests.

### Cabo Delgado: Between External Drivers and Structural Causes

Cabo Delgado is often portrayed as an epicenter of international terrorism. The local insurgency, known as Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama (ASWJ), pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2019, becoming part of its Central Africa Province.

There is also evidence of foreign fighters originating from neighboring countries such as South Africa and Tanzania.

While partially accurate, this narrative is incomplete. By emphasizing external dynamics, it tends to obscure critical internal drivers.

A growing body of research, including analyses by the International Crisis Group, suggests that most insurgents are motivated less by religious ideology and more by socio-economic exclusion.

The rapid expansion of extractive industries in the province has not been matched by effective inclusion policies.

Limited local skills and insufficient investment in education have led companies such as TotalEnergies and ExxonMobil to rely on labor imported from other regions and abroad. As a result, economic growth has coincided with widening inequalities, fueling deep social grievances and increasing vulnerability to insurgent recruitment.

Since 2017, the conflict in Cabo Delgado has resulted in more than 6,500 deaths and displaced hundreds of thousands of people, making it one of the most severe security crises in Southern Africa. Rwanda’s military intervention, launched in 2021, has played a decisive role in containing the insurgency, contributing to the recovery of strategic areas and the gradual resumption of natural gas projects.

However, this security arrangement may now be at risk. Recent U.S. sanctions against Rwandan officials, combined with the European Union’s decision not to renew financial support for deployed forces in Mozambique, have significantly increased pressure on Kigali. In response, Rwandan authorities have signaled the possibility of withdrawal.

This scenario exposes a core vulnerability of the Mozambican state:

In this context, the insurgency should be understood as the product of a convergence of factors: transnational networks, certainly, but also economic marginalization, state absence, and governance failures. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive, they reinforce one another.

### **A Predominantly Military Response**

Faced with this complex reality, the Mozambican state's response has been largely military in nature. In addition to the Armed Forces of Mozambique (FADM) and the Rapid Intervention Unit, the country benefited from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) mission (SAMIM) between 2021 and 2024, as well as support from private military contractors.

The most significant turning point came with the deployment of the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF). Equipped with stronger operational capacity and discipline, Rwandan forces succeeded in reclaiming key territories, reducing insurgent attacks, and enabling the resumption of energy projects, including the Afungi gas complex.

Their operations have, in several instances, been better received by local communities, partly due to linguistic proximity and professional conduct. Nevertheless, this effectiveness does not eliminate critical concerns. Rwanda's intervention was based on a bilateral agreement whose terms remain largely undisclosed.

The lack of transparency including the absence of parliamentary consultation raises important questions regarding legality, financial arrangements, and the nature of the commitments undertaken by the Mozambican state.

### **Opacity, Geopolitics, and Regional Tensions**

Concerns surrounding Rwanda's presence are further compounded by the broader regional context. Rwanda's involvement in the conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), including allegations of support for the M23 rebel

group, has drawn widespread criticism from international actors.

The 2024 memorandum of understanding between the European Union and Rwanda on critical raw materials adds another layer of complexity. While framed as part of Europe's energy transition strategy, it has faced criticism over suspicions that some of these minerals may originate from conflict-affected areas.

Within this context, concerns have emerged voiced by political actors and civil society in Mozambique, that economic and strategic interests may be shaping the military presence in Cabo Delgado. While such concerns do not negate the stabilizing role played by Rwandan forces, they underscore the need for greater public scrutiny and transparency.

### **The Threat of Withdrawal and Its Implications**

On March 2, the United States imposed sanctions on the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) and four of its senior officials due to their alleged links to the M23 militia and operations in the DRC. Facing mounting pressure both domestically and internationally, the European Union subsequently announced that it would not extend its financial support for RDF operations in Cabo Delgado.

These developments were poorly received in Kigali, with senior officials warning that Rwanda could withdraw from northern Mozambique if financial support is not secured. In an interview with *Jeune Afrique* on April 3, President Paul Kagame stated that Mozambique and the multinational companies operating in Cabo Delgado should bear the cost of securing their interests, noting that Rwanda has spent approximately five times more on counterinsurgency efforts than the €40 million contributed by the EU.

Nearly five years after Rwandan forces entered northern Mozambique, the threat of

withdrawal has reignited domestic debate and shed new light on the original bilateral agreement between the government of Filipe Nyusi and Kigali.

During a recent parliamentary session, Judite Macuácuá, a member of the Mozambique Democratic Movement (MDM), criticized the lack of transparency and argued that the presence of Rwandan troops serves the economic interests of FRELIMO while exposing Mozambique to political and diplomatic pressure from Kigali.

Supporting calls for transparency, RENAMO MP José Manteigas warned that failure to meet Rwanda's demands could lead to outcomes similar to those in the DRC, including resource exploitation and prolonged conflict.

These statements reflect growing concern among political actors and civil society that Rwanda's presence may be driven less by human security considerations and more by the protection of strategic economic interests. In light of this, both the continued presence of RDF forces and any potential withdrawal raise broader questions about strategy, international negotiation, and domestic political legitimacy.

## Potential Impacts of a Withdrawal

### Security

A withdrawal of Rwandan forces would create a security vacuum that Mozambique is unlikely to fill in the short term. Operational limitations within the FADM, including gaps in training, logistics, and troop morale would increase the risk of insurgent resurgence, with direct consequences for civilians and critical infrastructure, particularly in areas such as Palma, Montepuez, and Mocímboa da Praia. Strategic projects, notably the Afungi gas complex, could also face renewed attacks or disruptions.

### Economic

Heightened insecurity and perceptions of prolonged instability could prompt foreign investors in the gas and mining sectors to delay or

suspend projects.

This would damage Mozambique's reputation and further erode investor confidence, affecting future partnerships and foreign direct investment. Given the BOOT (build-own-operate-transfer) structure of major LNG projects, which prioritizes early returns for multinational companies, additional delays could significantly postpone broader economic benefits for the country.

A withdrawal could also increase reliance on private security services, raising operational costs and potentially reducing state revenues.

### Political

Domestically, the threat of withdrawal has already intensified pressure on the central government, which faces criticism over its inability to ensure security in the country's most resource-rich province. If realized, withdrawal could trigger further scrutiny from international and regional partners, including SADC, the European Union, and the United States, potentially undermining confidence in Mozambique's governance structures.

It may also fuel internal tensions, including renewed protest movements and increased demands for transparency and accountability.

### Transparency as a prerequisite for sovereignty

As such, a potential Rwandan withdrawal represents not only an immediate military challenge, but a complex threat to the structural stability of Cabo Delgado and to the Mozambican state's ability to manage its most strategic province, both in terms of security and economic development.

It can be seen as a clear sign of the structural weaknesses of the model currently in place in Cabo Delgado.

Dependence on external forces, combined with the opacity of agreements and limited democratic oversight, raises profound questions about sovereignty, legitimacy and

sustainability.

Without greater transparency, accountability and a strategy centred on local populations, Cabo Delgado risks becoming a permanently militarised area, where security primarily serves strategic economic interests, to the detriment of the communities living there.

- Mozambique is not without options: its natural resource wealth, particularly its gas fields, is important to a European Union striving to diversify its energy imports amidst wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. As such, the EU (and the US) will be keen to find a durable security solution in Cabo Delgado.
- Cabo Delgado is also important to Rwanda – both for their strategic objective of being perceived as a stable regional military force and for their economic interests in Mozambican natural resources.
- These are the Frelimo government's negotiating cards, but to protect the country's interests, greater transparency is necessary.
- The biggest issue regarding the Rwandan presence is the secrecy around the deals behind it. Only when these are made transparent, can a democratic and knowledge-based decision be made.
- The gas projects in Cabo Delgado represent some of the country's greatest economic opportunities. The Mozambican people deserve to know more about the legal and security architecture surrounding them.

The challenge at hand is not merely to contain the insurgency, but to redefine the contract between the state, resources and citizens. Without such a change, any stability will be fragile and potentially illusory.



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