Insurgency Rebooted: External Support, Organisational Learning, and Mobilisation in the M23's Return

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Insurgency Rebooted:

External Support, Organisational Learning, and Mobilisation in the M23's Return

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1. Introduction

On the morning of June 13, 2022, residents of Bunagana, a small border town in North Kivu near the border with Uganda, awoke to find the Congolese flag replaced by that of the March 23 Movement (M23). Government troops had fled overnight after heavy clashes, leaving the rebels in control of one of the region's most strategic crossings. News of the capture of the first major town seized by the M23 in nearly a decade sent shockwaves through the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the wider Great Lakes region. It signaled not merely the reappearance of a defeated group, but the return of a well-armed and politically confident force capable of challenging government forces. For many observers, the capture of Bunagana marked the moment when M23 announced its return, challenging existing understandings of how insurgent groups reemerge after collapse.

The reemergence of M23 raises a central puzzle. How can an insurgent organisation, operating in the same territory and under broadly similar structural conditions, return to the battlefield with enhanced military and political effectiveness after nearly ten years of inactivity? The question is not only empirical but also theoretical. Research on civil war has largely focused on insurgent onset and termination, paying far less attention to how defeated groups reorganise, adapt, and sometimes return stronger than before. The M23 case offers a unique opportunity to explore this missing phase in the life cycle of rebellion: insurgent reconstitution.

This study seeks to answer this question: *What factors explain the reemergence of insurgent groups after collapse?* In doing so, it examines the factors through which M23's adaptation increased its effectiveness during their second military campaign which started in 2021 and intensified up to the present. Theoretically, this contributes to the literature on insurgent adaptation, building on but extending beyond classic works on civil war dynamics (Kalyvas, 2007; DeRouen & Newman 2014).

The question is also of practical importance. M23's return has reignited instability in a region already victim to underlying regional cleavages stemming from earlier wars. Understanding how such movements revive after defeat can contribute to peacebuilding strategies and regional security

policy, offering insights relevant not only to Central Africa but to conflict zones in the Sahel, Sudan, and beyond.

While the central role of external support in M23's return may initially appear obvious, this study does not seek to reveal a hidden or unexpected cause. Instead, it aims to clarify how external support interacts with internal processes over time. By tracing the sequencing through which these factors operate, the study specifies the conditions under which internal adaptation contributes to insurgent resurgence, and where its independent explanatory power reaches clear limits.

2. Literature Review

The literature on insurgency revival remains marked by analytical and empirical gaps. Works on insurgency onset, like those by Kalyvas (2007) and Fearon & Laitin (2003), focus on structural conditions such as state weakness, political exclusion, and competition for local control that contribute to the emergence of a rebellion. Kalyvas (2006) emphasises microfoundations of violence, showing how fragmented government authority and its practice of indiscriminate violence increases insurgent mobilisation (pp. 184, 189). Fearon & Laitin (2003) similarly identify state weakness, poverty, and large populations as key structural factors favouring insurgency. Collier et al. (2003) also argue that low economic development is a root cause of insurgency. Although these studies provide robust frameworks for understanding why insurgencies begin, their analytical reach rarely extends beyond the first outbreak, leaving unanswered questions about why defeated groups sometimes return more powerful than before.

Similarly, research on the termination of conflict examines the institutional factors underpinning peace settlements (DeRouen & Newman, 2014). These contributions often concentrate on what happens to rebel groups after military defeat or peace agreements, assuming that peacebuilding settlements can both prevent and provoke insurgent resurgence depending on how effectively immediate security goals are implemented. They also state the need to study how insurgencies evolve after apparent defeat (DeRouen & Newman, 2014, p. 359).

A third body of literature investigates rebel governance, as synthesised in the works of Mampilly (2011) and Arjona et al. (2015). These texts focus on how alternative governance models, and local

institution-building by insurgents can improve their longevity and effectiveness. Yet, their focus is almost entirely on successful or ongoing rebel governance structures, rather than the adaptation strategies in post-defeat settings which are the focus of this research.

Indeed, most research does not approach the aftermath of defeat as a topic of its own: the phase leading to revival is rarely theorised as a distinct analytical concern. Sustained enquiry is missing into insurgent learning, adaptation, or innovative practices that enable organisations to survive repression and reconstitute after near eradication (Staniland, 2012, p. 245). Furthermore, while the gap between clear victories and defeat of rebel groups is acknowledged, the literature is underdeveloped in determining which factors not only sustain insurgencies but also facilitate revival through newly acquired capacities (Ingalls, 2017, p. 127). This limits the understanding of the dynamic, multi-mechanism processes by which defeated groups are led to reemerge and again threaten state authority.

Much prior literature also suffers from empirical and conceptual limitations (Staniland, 2012, p. 245). Structural explanations like state weakness, ethnic fragmentation, resource abundance, or geography remain dominant in explaining the root causes of rebellion (Kalyvas, 2006, pp. 142–145). However, analyses of how changes in leadership, technology, recruitment, or foreign support impact revival are rare. Case-specific research does exist, for example, Bansal's (2005) study of the revived insurgency in Baluchistan, which attributes its resurgence to external support. However, such research remains context-bound and does not establish generalisable mechanisms. The field has not yet properly integrated theory-driven frameworks that can distinguish what are the factors which are the most influential in explaining insurgent reemergence.

Numerous prominent cases indeed demonstrate that insurgent resurgence after collapse is not an uncommon phenomenon: the Taliban's return in Afghanistan after years of exile and defeat was facilitated by organisational adaptation; the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda repeatedly reconstituted itself through forced recruitment and shifting its area of operations; and the FDLR in the Great Lakes region has persisted for decades by forging local alliances (Wani, 2021; Blattman & Annan, 2010; Kabamba, 2021). While these examples can serve to illustrate that rebel groups can reemerge after setbacks, the factors enabling insurgent resurgence remain underexplored in the academic literature, representing an important research gap (Braithwaite & Cunningham, 2019).

In response to this, this study seeks to address the "black box" of the explanatory factors of resurgence. It tests and builds upon theories of external support, organisational learning, and mobilisation in explaining renewed effectiveness. In doing so, the research will advance a theoretically driven account of insurgency revival designed to speak not only to specific cases, but also across contexts.

3. Theoretical Framework

Insurgent reemergence is understood here as the reactivation, reconstitution, or renewed effectiveness of insurgent organisations after collapse or defeat. It serves as the dependent variable of this study. Conceptually, resurgence is a process in which a previously demobilised or militarily defeated dormant rebel group successfully restores its operational capacity and reassert itself as a significant actor within the conflict arena, capable of posing a significant threat to the government in the country in which it operates (Staniland, 2014; Rich & Duyvesteyn, 2012).

The resurgence of insurgent groups can be framed through three core explanatory factors: organisational learning that strengthens internal institutions and cohesion (Staniland, 2012, pp. 148–152), external support that supplies a material lifeline to otherwise weak organisations (Staniland, 2012, pp. 145–147; Huang & Sullivan, 2021, p. 796), and renewed mobilisation of fighters and supporters through embedded social networks and community ties (Staniland, 2012, pp. 148–150).

While focusing on these explanatory factors for resurgence, it is important to highlight that they operate within broader structural environments. Research on insurgencies consistently highlights factors such as state weakness, fragmented territorial control, regional political dynamics, and access to resource revenues as shaping the opportunities available to armed groups (Kalyvas, 2006). These structural elements are not treated as primary causal factors here, but as scope conditions, shaping the context and potentially amplifying the effects of the explanatory factors theorised below (where state weakness enables covert reorganisation, porous borders sustain cross-border networks, and resource-based economies generate financial flows that indirectly support insurgent adaptation).

Recognising these structural conditions improves causal inference (Folger, Poole & Stutman, 2024). Their potential effects are acknowledged in the empirical analysis, while maintaining the primary theoretical emphasis on the following explanatory factors (Curini & Franzeze, 2020, p. 115).

3. 1. External Support

The explanatory factor of external support as theorised here focuses on how logistical, financial, and military support from another actor, usually a state, can contribute to an insurgent group's revival. External support functions through transnational alliances as documented by Tamm (2016) using evidence of alliances between rebel groups and the governments of neighboring countries during the first Congo war. She establishes a capacity-building pathway for external support where external patrons provide logistical assistance, weapons, and protection within their territory. In this view, external support serves as a lifeline capable of reversing the group's material decline and constitutes a critical catalyst for rebel reemergence.

However, its impact is not uniform: insights from Sawyer et al. (2015) introduce another pathway, characterised by strategic uncertainty and bargaining failure. This mechanism determines that the nature of the support given to an insurgent group is just as important as its volume. Resources provided by external actors can be distinguished by their application. Firstly, Predictable-Use Resources, such as direct troop support or sanctuary within the supporting country's territory, have effects that are relatively easier to observe and measure for the state in which the rebel group operates (Sawyer et al., 2015, p. 1179). Their impact, while significant, can be more easily contained because it is assessable. Secondly, Flexible-Use Resources, most notably direct financial aid and weapon transfers, are versatile by nature (Sawyer et al., 2015, p. 1179). For example, financial funds can be allocated for various causes, from military procurement and soldier salaries to political patronage, propaganda, and administration building. Similarly, portable weapons can be traded covertly on illicit markets.

It is this versatility that creates a fundamental strategic problem for the state fighting the rebels. The government faces significant informational asymmetry; as it cannot accurately determine how these flexible resources are being converted into either immediate war-fighting capacity or long-

term organisational resilience. This creates a state of opacity which helps the rebel group by creating uncertainty about the true extent of its strength and future intentions.

Hence, the theoretical expectation is that insurgent groups that receive sustained external support, especially flexible use resources such as financial aid or portable weapons are more likely to resurge because such support enables reconstitution and creates strategic uncertainty that undermines the adversary's commitment to peace.

Consequently, a rebel commitment problem will arise in any potential negotiation. The state rationally fears that during a ceasefire or peace process, the rebel group will use its flexible resource base to covertly strengthen itself, only to not respect the peace agreement and resume hostilities from a position of enhanced power. Faced with an adversary it perceives as unable to credibly commit to peace, the state is likely to estimate that continued fighting with the rebel group is a better option than negotiations (Sawyer et al., 2015, p. 1178)

This leads to the general expectation that flexible and versatile external support benefits the resurgent insurgent group by helping it sustain long-term armed conflict due to the strategic uncertainty created for the adversary.

3. 2. Organisational Learning

Organisational learning theory, as articulated by Rich and Duyvesteyn (2012), posits that defeated insurgent groups adapt strategically and tactically to avoid prior errors. Their analysis emphasises that insurgent movements are not static but evolve through mechanisms of functional focus, organisational coherence, and objectives (pp. 77–79). Retaining core leadership, when those leaders learn and adapt from past failures, can serve as a crucial asset by providing stable strategic guidance that accelerates an insurgent group's ability to effectively reemerge. Such adaptation reflects a continual learning process in which insurgent groups refine internal hierarchies, adjust the balance between violence and resource generation according to their logistical needs (Rich & Duyvesteyn, 2012, pp. 77–79).

Based on this explanatory factor, insurgent groups that retain their leadership over time and hence the internal knowledge necessary for an insurgency to have continuity across phases of active

rebellion and dormancy, are hypothesised to be more likely to achieve resurgence. With the most important condition overall remaining systematic tactical and strategic adaptation.

This can be complemented by Serena's (2014) argument that insurgent organisational adaptation is not merely structural but cyclical, emerging through ongoing mechanisms linking inputs (like information and training), and outputs (translating inputs into good performances), thus creating a dynamic of persistent learning (p. 22). Drawing on evidence from the Iraqi insurgency, Serena (2014) shows that insurgent groups evolve through continuous feedback loops of knowledge collection, transfer, and integration, that enable innovation and responsiveness to new contextual pressures.

However, he distinguishes between tactical adaptation, reflected in innovations such as improved armament or battlefield tactics, and strategic adaptation, which requires institutionalised learning across networks and time. Insurgencies that can adapt both tactically and strategically may develop a sustainable capacity for resilience and reemergence even after apparent defeat (Serena, 2014, p. 74).

Therefore, the hypothesis derived from these insights is that groups that institutionalise learning processes and effectively linking knowledge inputs to operational outputs are more likely to resurge, compared to groups that lack cyclical learning mechanisms.

Viewed together, these insights suggest that organisational learning can enhance an insurgent's capacity for resurgence, particularly when sufficient material and political conditions already enable reconstitution.

3. 3. Mobilisation

A well-rounded theory of insurgent mobilisation as an explanatory factor to insurgent reemergence that integrates insights from both Olson (2009) and Jardine (2014) offers a powerful framework to understand how rebel groups can sustain and expand their support base through effective recruitment strategies in complex conflict environments.

Olson's (2009) work on collective action reveals that rational, self-interested actors tend to free-ride, avoiding the costs of participation while still benefiting from collective outcomes (p. 63).

This logic explains why large groups rarely organise voluntarily for common purposes unless coercion or selective incentives push individuals to contribute to the cause. Applied to insurgency, this theory underscores that successful rebel mobilisation depends critically on leveraging mechanisms that overcome free-rider problems, such as offering credible rewards and protection (Olson, 2009, pp. 61–65).

Building on this foundation, Jardine's (2014) mobilisation and conflict outcome theory emphasises the transactional nature of the relationship insurgent groups form with civilian populations. Rebel groups secure popular support through the strategic provision of compensation (goods, services, and protection) in exchange for allegiance. Beyond giving out material benefits, insurgents manipulate opinions through propaganda and practice coercive recruitment to keep population support at lower costs. Jardine (2014) further details how insurgencies navigate organisational challenges, balancing scale expansion (growing administrative presence to manage the local economy) and centralisation (hierarchical decision-making and coordination) to increase efficiency in mobilising support. However, these organisational developments entail a paradoxical "core insurgent's dilemma," as more centralised groups become vulnerable to state attacks, while decentralised structures can resist repression better but administer poorly (Jardine, 2014, pp. 50–56).

Therefore, the theoretical hypothesis here would be that insurgent groups which combine selective incentives, coercive structures, and transactional engagement vis-à-vis the civilian populations, while balancing organisational centralisation and scale, are more likely to maintain or expand support and resurge after defeat.

The combined theoretical perspective posits that mobilisation is neither automatic nor solely driven by shared grievances or identity. Rather, insurgent effectiveness hinges on overcoming collective action problems through selective incentives and coercive structures, transactional exchanges that reward participation, and organisational innovations that balance growth against vulnerability. Civilians weigh costs and benefits pragmatically resulting in that insurgents must continuously invest resources to sustain and expand their support base under shifting conflict conditions. Mobilisation is cumulative and contextual, sensitive to state permeabilities, population preferences, and resource availability.

Stemming from this, the general expectations would be that insurgent groups that effectively manage recruitment, provide incentives, exercise coercion when necessary, and adapt their structures to changing environments will have a greater prospect of resurgence.

4. Methods and Case Selection

4. 1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, single-case design using theory-guided process tracing. This design suits the research question seeking to explain the causal factors behind M23's reemergence as an effective insurgent movement. Process tracing enables the identification of external support, organisational learning, and mobilisation explanatory factors and assesses their causal relevance (Collier, 2011). A single-case approach offers the depth needed to uncover these pathways and relates them to broader theories of insurgent resurgence (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 217).

4. 2. Case Selection

The resurgence of M23 in eastern Congo is selected as a *most-likely* case for studying the reemergence of insurgent groups after collapse, in line with case-selection criteria emphasizing theoretical leverage and process-tracing potential (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 210-211). Within the scope conditions of chronic state weakness, porous borders, and lootable natural resources, theory strongly predicts that the three explanatory factors should be particularly visible, making this case advantageous for testing these hypotheses (Gerring, 2007). Following its military defeat in 2013 and subsequent demobilisation, the group's renewed operational strength after 2021 presents a very relevant example of full insurgent resurgence (Nkatomba, 2024, p. 272). This justifies the use of single-case process tracing to speak to broader debates on insurgent reemergence (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 17).

In terms of generalisability, this study does not seek statistical generalisation to a population of cases but rather advances contingent generalisation by identifying the explanatory factors

interacting within a specific context, explaining M23's resurgence. The findings contribute to theoretical abstraction by refining and testing existing theories, offering insights that can inform future comparative research and typological theorising in similar contexts (Blatter & Blume, 2008, pp. 30-32).

The temporal scope of this study is limited to the period from 2021 to the present. Although M23 remained formally intact after its 2013 defeat, the years prior to 2021 produced extremely limited observable activity, making them unsuitable for factor-based analysis. Process tracing requires focusing on periods in which causal factors can be clearly observed empirically (George & Bennett, 2005). In the case of M23, publicly available information becomes substantially richer only once the group resumed military operations in late 2021. Therefore, earlier years are treated as background conditions rather than part of the causal process under investigation.

4. 3. Operationalisation and Source Selection

This section provides the empirical predictions for the hypothesised explanatory factors that would determine the outcome, rebel resurgence. The analysis draws on a combination of secondary sources. These sources provide detailed evidence needed to trace and track organisational procedures, evidence of external patronage, and local mobilisation strategies (Creswell, 2021).

Insurgent Reemergence

To be operationalised empirically, insurgent resurgence is measured through observable indicators that capture a group's return to meaningful military and political activity. Resurgence occurs when a previously defeated organisation demonstrates sustained operational capacity reflected in continued participation in armed engagements, alongside evidence of renewed territorial control and governance functions. Also, evidence of political relevance, such as participation in negotiations or exerting influence over local authorities, also signals resurgence. A group is therefore considered to have resurged when it exhibits renewed military and governance capacity, following a period of dormancy in which it had ceased operations and showed no observable organisational or battlefield activity. This multidimensional approach ensures that resurgence is captured as a process of reconstitution rather than a single event.

To measure resurgence, sources were chosen to provide chronological evidence of M23's military and political activity. UN and international NGO reports were prioritised for their systematic documentation of operations. Global and local news outlets were included to provide timely, on-the-ground accounts of clashes and governance actions. Academic analyses offered context and synthesis across multiple sources, helping to verify patterns and corroborate other sources.

External Support

With external support as an explanatory factor, we would expect to observe sustained backing from an external actor that materially enhanced the group's overall capabilities. This may be visible through improved weaponry, better-trained fighters, or the ability to launch coordinated and sustained offensives, all linking back to their provision by an external actor. Crucially, concerning the use of flexible-resources, the group's rapid reconstitution or unexpectedly strong battlefield performance would suggest access to financial or other versatile resources that allowed it to rebuild covertly and unpredictably. Furthermore, evidence of strategic uncertainty would show if the Congolese government appears unable to gauge the group's true strength or hesitates to negotiate due to concerns about M23's long-term intentions.

For this factor, evidence from UN monitoring and investigative reports is key to documenting military involvement and financial flows. Predominantly international media reports, neutral to all sides, supply real-time coverage of cross-border transfers. Both broader and case-specific academic sources contextualise these dynamics within broader patterns of insurgent resurgence.

Organisational Learning

For the organisational learning explanatory factor in the case of M23, we would expect to see clear evidence that the group preserved or quickly reconstituted its core internal leadership structures after its 2013 defeat. This would include the reappearance of previously influential figures or continuity of strategic direction across time. We would also expect observable improvements in battlefield discipline, coordination, and tactical execution, marking an evolution from the pre-defeat period. Evidence of adapted strategies, such as more effective territorial consolidation, better logistical organisation, or refined political objectives, would indicate that M23 incorporated lessons from past failures.

For assessing organisational learning, academic studies on the case regarding the group's organisational adjustments and governance are essential for tracing institutional memory and tactical evolution, while local journalism offers the best available sources to gain insight into the movement's leadership continuity and adaptation, allowing evidence of strategic and tactical changes over time.

Mobilisation

If mobilisation as an explanatory factor contributed to M23's resurgence, we would expect to see evidence that the group successfully rebuilt its support base among local populations through selective incentives or coercion. This could manifest in communities providing recruits, logistical assistance, or shelter, indicating that civilians judged cooperation with M23 as either beneficial or necessary. We would also expect adjustments within M23 that help manage civilian interactions through either greater centralisation to coordinate governance-like functions, or through decentralised structures that allow the group to operate flexibly while maintaining influence over local civilians. Expanded recruitment, improved administrative presence, or renewed legitimacy among local constituencies would signal that M23 overcame collective action barriers and sustainably rebuilt its support network.

Studying mobilisation requires sources detailing recruitment, civilian compliance, and governance structures. UN reports and NGO reports, especially from Human Rights Watch, are crucial for documenting the dynamics of M23's recruitment strategies and alliances within the population. Local journalism helps to capture the social and community-level impact of the M23's presence, while academic work provides theoretical framing and verification for empirical evidence.

Figure 1. the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo © 2012 Rift Valley Institute.

5. Analysis

Building on a historical overview of M23 and empirical analysis that this case satisfies the criteria for the outcome: insurgent resurgence, this section applies theory-guided process tracing to evaluate whether the three hypothesised explanatory factors: external support, organisational learning, and mobilisation, account for the outcome. By matching the observable implications of each factor to the empirical evidence from the 2021– December 2025 period, the analysis traces how the movement evolved from post-2013 collapse to renewed military, territorial, and political capacity. The discussion proceeds by analysing each factor, before turning to a comparative synthesis that assesses their relative causal importance.

5. 1. Historical Background

The March 23 Movement (M23) is a Congolese insurgent group rooted in an earlier rebel group: the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP), a predominantly ethnic Tutsi movement that was officially integrated into the Congolese army after the March 23 peace agreement in 2009 (Stearns, 2012, p.16). In 2012, ex-CNDP officers defected from FARDC, claiming Kinshasa failed to implement the agreement due to discrimination, forced relocations outside Kivu, and governance disputes (Stearns, 2012, p. 16). The newly formed M23 rapidly became a major armed actor in North Kivu (see Figure 1). During 2012 and 2013, M23 aimed to seize control of various areas in this province, briefly capturing Goma (the largest city in North Kivu and a major regional hub), taxing trade routes, and operating as a proto-governing force in parts of the town of Rutshuru (Kron, 2012; Stearns, 2012, pp. 39-42). In late 2013, they were eventually militarily defeated by FARDC and MONUSCO, the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC (Al Jazeera, 2013). After the group's official surrender, most fighters disarmed before reintegrating into society or fleeing into Rwanda and Uganda and the group was widely considered fully dismantled (Al Jazeera, 2013; UNSC, 2013, p. 1).

5. 2. Insurgent Reemergence

M23 satisfies the defined criteria for insurgent resurgence: sustained military operations, renewed territorial control and governance, and restored political relevance. After several years of dormancy with no armed operations or any other kind of activity, the group relaunched sustained armed attacks in late 2021, conducting repeated, coordinated strikes against FARDC and allied militias across Rutshuru and later Masisi, capturing major positions and using heavy weaponry (Besheer, 2022). This resurgence occurred in this period because it marked a convergence of destabilising shifts in eastern Congo and its neighborhood, rising inter-state frictions (e.g. Rwanda and the DRC), weakening local security arrangements, and a breakdown of earlier constraints that had previously limited M23's room for action. These accumulating pressures created a strategic opening that made renewed large-scale operations viable at that particular moment and not in the preceding years. This activity persisted through 2022–2024, with ongoing clashes and offensives rather than isolated incidents, indicating a restored operational capacity (Human Rights Watch, 2024). M23 also re-established territorial control over key towns and axes, most notably the border town of Bunagana, sections of the RN2 and RN3 roads, and zones near strategic mining and trade areas, using checkpoints and fixed positions to regulate movement and extract rents (VOA News, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2024). In areas under its control, reports describe governance functions such as taxation at roadblocks, local security provision, interference in local authority appointments, and administration of dispute resolution marked by serious abuses, showing renewed de facto governance structures (Ajibode & Dauda, 2025, p. 622). Politically, the group regained centrality in regional diplomacy: it is explicitly addressed in the Nairobi and Luanda peace processes (diplomatic initiatives aimed at negotiating ceasefires and easing interstate tensions related to the eastern DRC conflict), has issued formal statements on ceasefire announcements, features prominently in UN, AU and EAC discussions, and even functions as a quasi-state diplomatic actor, conducting outreach to foreign governments and taking part in peace negotiations (East African Community, n.d.; Rukanga, 2023; Kupemba, 2025). Taken together, this evidence of sustained military operations, restored territorial control and governance, and renewed political relevance after a period of quiescence demonstrates that rebel resurgence, as previously defined and operationalised, has occurred in the case of M23.

Against this empirically established outcome, the analysis now turns to the three hypothesised explanatory factors: external support, organisational learning, and mobilisation.

5. 3. External Support

External support constitutes a decisive explanatory factor in explaining M23's resurgence, operating as the core enabler that allowed the group to reemerge as a well-armed, territorially expansive insurgency from 2021 onward. Because external support can generate both predictable-use capacity-building effects and flexible-use strategic advantages, its presence significantly impacts the logistical and military feasibility of insurgent revival (Sawyer et al., 2015). In the case of M23, empirical evidence indicates a continuity of Rwandan support for the insurgency, alongside an escalation between the movement's first and second phases. Rwanda's involvement in 2012–2013, widely understood as serving its security interests in eastern Congo, particularly concerns over hostile armed groups operating near its border, was widely suspected and partially substantiated through UN investigations (UN, 2012). As for post-2021, external support is both thoroughly investigated and shown to be more substantial and coordinated than in the first phase, providing precisely the types of resources identified in the theoretical framework as critical for insurgent resurgence.

A central aspect of this causal factor is the provision of predictable-use resources such as sanctuary, involvement in commands, and even direct military reinforcement; all factors which directly rebuild the organisational and operational capacities of insurgent groups.

Following the 2013 defeat, Rwanda and Uganda provided refuge for M23's military and political cadres, which prevented the total dissolution of the movement and preserved a latent command structure (Politico.cd, 2022). This sanctuary proved essential when resurgence began: leaders like Sultani Makenga re-entered the theatre of operations from protective rear bases, making the

reactivation of dormant organisational networks easier and safer. The scale of Rwanda's subsequent involvement, however, marks a significant intensification compared to the first M23 rebellion. Multiple independent reports including the UN Group of Experts identify between 3,000 and 4,000 Rwandan Defence Force (RDF) troops directly operating on Congolese territory in direct coordination with the M23 (Biden, 2025; Kahombo, 2025, p. 16; Serrecchia, 2025). UN

peacekeeping chief Jean-Pierre Lacroix publicly confirmed the presence of RDF units in Goma supporting M23, emphasising Rwanda's direct military role (Wafula, 2025).

This brings the scale of external support in this case to be sufficient in causing reemergence. Indeed, RDF contingents participated in major offensives, such as the 2025 capture of Goma, which was executed by what multiple sources describe as an M23–RDF coalition (Biden, 2025; Wafula, 2025). From 2021 onward, RDF units provided artillery, battlefield coordination, and logistical reinforcement, while Rwandan officers embedded within M23 oversaw training and exercised substantial influence over the group's command (Wafula, 2025; Serrecchia, 2025). The training system within the movement's forces became institutionalised: recruits underwent a five-month program at training camps such as Tchanzu, where they were taught tactics, ideology, and discipline under direct oversight from Rwandan personnel (Wafula, 2025; Serrecchia, 2025). These predictable-use resources directly addressed earlier weaknesses in discipline, coordination, and durability that contributed to its surrender in 2013 (Koko, 2014, p. 270).

However, an equally critical component of external support, particularly for sustaining rebellion, is the provision of flexible-use resources: portable, high-tech weapons and diversified financial flows that generate strategic uncertainty and complicate state counter-insurgency (Sawyer et al., 2015, p. 1179). The recurrence of portable advanced arms such as Israeli-made anti-tank missiles, armed drones, and GPS-jamming systems all indicate a significant advancement in M23's military capabilities relative to its 2012–2013 arsenal (Wafula, 2025; Kahombo, 2025). Because these resources are concealable and redeployable, the Congolese state faces serious informational challenges in assessing M23's strength, exactly as Sawyer et al. (2015) predict (p. 1179). This uncertainty weakens Kinshasa's bargaining position as it cannot reliably determine whether ceasefires will hold, whether M23's capabilities are peaking or still increasing, or whether negotiations would simply grant the movement breathing room to consolidate further.

Looking at financial flows to and from the M23 reinforce this opacity. M23's capture of Rubaya where about 15 to 20% of the world's coltan is extracted enabled it to impose a formal 15% tax generating approximately $800,000 monthly (Ajibode & Dauda, 2025, p. 3). UN led investigations trace substantial amounts of this coltan to smuggling routes into Rwanda (Wafula, 2025; Kahombo, 2025, p. 11). These funds are a typical example of flexible-use resources: they can be diverted to

arms purchases, wages, governance building, diplomatic outreach, or propaganda, but their allocation remains opaque to the Congolese government (El Miviri, 2023; Wafula, 2025). As a result, M23's true financial and military capabilities remain uncertain, reinforcing a commitment problem in negotiations (Sawyer et al., 2015, p. 1178).

The behavioural evidence of both parties reflects this dynamic. Kinshasa frequently denounces Rwanda's support but remains unable to assess the full extent of the M23's capabilities (Reuters, 2022; El Miviri, 2023). Therefore, the Congolese government conditions dialogue on prior withdrawal and disarmament, fearing that negotiations without rollback would allow a covertly strengthened rebel group to entrench further (El Miviri, 2023). The M23, empowered by external backing, felt comfortable in escalating its demands in negotiations and has repeatedly withdrawn from mediated talks, most notably in March 2025 following EU sanctions (Reuters, 2025). This mutual distrust and negotiation paralysis aligns with Sawyer et al.'s (2015) expectation that flexible external support undermines credible commitment and stabilises conflict rather than resolving it.

In sum, although predictable-use resources (sanctuary, training, direct RDF military involvement) rebuilt M23's organisational and operational capacity and are highly observable and therefore do not contribute to strategic opacity, this does not contradict the theory. Successful reemergence of an insurgency is considered theoretically feasible when both predictable-use and flexible-use resources perform complementary functions: capacity-building on the one hand, and uncertainty-generating flexibility on the other. Indeed, predictable-use resources support the rebuilding of organisational capacity, while it is the flexible-use resources (portable advanced weapons and diversified financial flows) that generate the opacity and uncertainty identified by Sawyer et al. (2015) as essential for enabling insurgent resurgence.

Both streams complement each other, forming the core enabling factor for M23's resurgence and shaping the conditions in which organisational learning operates.

However, External support was necessary but not sufficient: effectiveness depended on M23's ability to absorb, organise, and institutionalise these resources.

5. 4. Organisational Learning

The organisational learning factor is causally important in M23's resurgence, acting as an internal multiplier that translated external support into durable effects. Evidence shows institutionalised learning through preserved leadership, strategic adaptation toward quasi-state governance, and superior tactical execution versus the first rebellion phase. Operationalisation requires retained core leadership and command structures for institutional memory (Rich & Duyvesteyn, 2012, pp. 77–79).

The M23 resurgence case provides precisely this. Critically, key figures from the first rebellion such as Sultani Makenga and Bertrand Bisimwa maintained their positions into the second phase, with Makenga continuing to lead military operations and Bisimwa acting as political chief even after going into hiding in neighboring Uganda after the group's collapse (Politico.cd, 2022; Beloff, 2025, pp. 49–58). Their command structures were quickly reactivated from sanctuaries, often located near the porous borders with Rwanda and Uganda (Politico.cd, 2022). This continuity of leadership and the rapid reconstitution of a "centralized parallel government" (Ford & Karr, 2025) provided the coherence and institutional memory necessary for an effective reemergence (Rich & Duyvesteyn, 2012). These preserved structures ensured that the knowledge inputs stemming from the lessons from the movement's 2013 military defeat were retained and actively implemented (Serena, 2014, p. 22). The result was an organisational scaffolding that allowed M23 to mobilise recruits quickly and efficiently absorb and deploy the resources provided by its external patrons, directly contributing to its sustained operational capacity.

The most decisive evidence of organisational learning, however, lies in M23's strategic adaptation from a short-lived military campaign in 2012–2013 to a comprehensive quasi-state building project (Ajibode & Dauda, 2025; Ford & Karr, 2025). This shift represents a major strategic adaptation aimed at ensuring long-term survival and control (Serena, 2014, p. 74). The group has moved beyond mere military presence or resource extraction to establish parallel governance structures including tax systems, judicial services, and social services such as sanitation and education (Ajibode & Dauda, 2025, pp. 3, 5; Ford & Karr, 2025). This constitutes a notable inflection from previous Rwandan-backed groups active in the eastern DRC (Ford & Karr, 2025; Tamm, 2009), revealing a learned understanding that durable territorial control requires governance and

legitimacy rather than coercion alone. Correspondingly, M23 developed a formalised economic strategy to fund its governance project. Examples of this include imposing taxes on mineral extraction and additional business taxes in the areas they administer (Ajibode & Dauda, 2025, p. 3).

Such formalised resource generation structures provide stable revenue and directly address the logistical weaknesses that undermined the group in 2013 (Rich & Duyvesteyn, 2012). This strategic shift forms the core institutionalised learning output that makes the current resurgence significantly more robust than its first phase. By filling the vacuum of state administration in areas under its control, M23 has not only achieved territorial consolidation but also restored its political relevance, two of the core criteria for insurgent resurgence (Staniland, 2014; Rich & Duyvesteyn 2012). Offering governance and services creates a more durable political foundation and enhances the rebel group's long-term resilience.

Organisational learning is also observable in the group's tactical adaptation and improved capabilities on the battlefield. The M23 campaign since 2021 has been described as a strategic and premeditated campaign using sophisticated weaponry and a structured command (Ajibode & Dauda, 2025, p. 3; Africanova, 2025). The group's capacity to seize and hold strategic positions such as Bunagana, as well as its escalatory offensives and occupation of major provincial capitals like Goma and Bukavu, achievements that the group was not able to sustain in 2013, demonstrates a higher degree of coordination and tactical competence (Ford & Karr, 2025). The recruits making these advances possible were trained under commanders such as "colonel" Kanyamibwa, underscoring the presence of a formal, disciplined integration process (Politico.cd, 2022).

These enhancements reflect a cyclical learning process whereby the failures of the earlier 2012–2013 campaign, such as the inability to sustain territorial control, internal factional splits, tactical overextension, and the absence of durable governance structures were internalised and translated into improved operational outputs (Koko, 2014; Serena, 2014). Increased strategic coordination facilitated the military victories necessary for M23 to capture and govern territory, directly enabling its broader quasi-state capacities and thereby driving the resurgence.

5. 5. Mobilisation

The third explanatory factor, mobilisation, understood through Olson's (2009) logic of collective action and Jardine's (2014) transactional model, predicts that insurgencies reemerge by rebuilding their support and recruitment networks, only if they overcome free-rider incentives through credible selective rewards, coercion where necessary, and organisational forms that balance scale and vulnerability.

Applied to M23, this framework expects evidence of: selective incentives or protection offered to recruits and occupied communities, coercive practices when incentives are insufficient, transactional governance that converts civilian compliance into manpower and logistics, and organisational adjustments (centralisation or flexible decentralisation) that make mobilisation administratively feasible.

The empirical record assembled for this study confirms some of these expectations but also indicates that certain practices, especially mass coercive recruitment, largely appear as a consolidation and scaling mechanism starting in the more recent years of the second phase of the insurgency (2024–2025). While the initial start of the resurgence (late 2021–2022) is better explained by the help of preserved CNDP/ethnic Tutsi networks and external backing.

First, the evidence shows that selective incentives and transactional governance were active components of M23's strategy from the moment the group reappeared and intensified thereafter. Once M23 began to hold territory, it instituted basic administrative functions like tax collection, and these were used to finance salaries, local services, and the apparatus of control (Ajibode & Dauda, 2025, p. 3). This closely relates to Jardine's (2014) model: civilians under uniform M23 control were offered a transaction, and by complying received more predictable security and economic opportunities like access to markets than under competing predatory actors (Ajibode & Dauda, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2024). This transactional exchange reduces the net cost of cooperation for many residents, converting potential free-riders into passive supporters. The existence of functioning checkpoints, tax collection, and administrative staffing therefore counts as empirical evidence that selective incentives and governance-based mobilisation were in play and helped sustain M23's ability to extract recruits, resources, and logistical cooperation from civilian populations.

Secondly, the problem of collective action as described by Olson (2009) is visible in why coercion appears later and not as the initial solution for recruitment. Indeed, while Human Rights Watch and other monitors documented instances of forced conscription as early as 2022–2023, large-scale, systematic forced recruitment, often involving minors and coercion via local village chiefs, becomes salient in 2024–2025 (Human Rights Watch, 2023; United Nations, 2025; Deutsche Welle, 2025). This timeline suggests that mobilisation through coercion was not the principal explanatory factor that enabled the initial reconstitution of M23. It rather seems like coercion emerged as a cost-effective strategy after achieving territorial control and administrative obligations. Olson (2009) predicts this dynamic: coercion is a relatively blunt instrument that insurgents prefer to reserve for situations where selective incentives and social ties cannot provide sufficient recruits (p. 62). In M23's case, early mobilisation relied more on pre-existing CNDP and ethnic networks and voluntary recruitment from communities sympathetic to the movement, often due to ethnic solidarity with the predominantly Tutsi group (Biden, 2025; Beloff, 2025). However, when the movement's ambitions grew and it expanded its territory further, holding large urban areas, and mount major offensive operations against the FARDC, did forced recruitment become common, precisely because the scale of manpower required exceeded what the movement could obtain with voluntary recruitment through network and incentives (UN, 2025, p. 71).

Thirdly, the Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC) matters as a political catalyst that critically widened M23's mobilisational reach. The AFC, an alliance announced publicly in late 2023 and uniting M23 and several smaller regional rebel groups, positioned M23 within a broader project and offered an ideological frame and administrative promises that could attract recruits beyond the movement's original Tutsi base (United Nations, 2024, pp. 2-3). By joining several smaller armed groups in late 2023, M23 could rely on allied factions to supply fighters, which temporarily limited the need for large-scale recruitment within its own ranks (United Nations, 2025). However, as the coalition expanded its territorial ambitions in 2024–2025, these allied contributions proved insufficient. As mentioned before, the growing need to hold territory and administer populations created the need for mass recruitment, including episodes of forced recruitment documented in 2025 showing that the alliance eased but did not eliminate the group's mobilisation demands.

Also, M23's mobilisational success rested on a hybrid organisation that combined centralised strategic command with decentralised local recruitment and administration. Evidence of structured

training (five-month programs at camps such as Tchanzu) and embedded Rwandan oversight presents evidence of centralised training and doctrine (Wafula, 2025; Serrecchia, 2025). At the same time, local commanders appear to have retained autonomy to manage taxes, recruits, and civilian relations in contextually sensitive ways (Ajibode & Dauda, 2025). This hybridisation reflects Jardine's (2014) "core insurgent's dilemma" resolution with enough centralisation to provide coordinated recruitment, but enough decentralisation to adapt tactics and governance to local conditions (pp. 50-56). Empirically, this recruitment model both facilitated the mass training of recruits after 2023 and allowed M23 to exploit local social networks for logistical support during 2021–2023.

Altogether, the evidence shows that M23 employed selective incentives, transactional governance, mutual support within the AFC, and a hybrid centralisation structure to overcome collective action problems and organise recruitment, consistent with Olson (2009) and Jardine (2014). However, timing is critical: mobilisation did not spark the initial resurgence in 2021–2022. Alternative explanations for it indicate that the movement relied primarily on preserved CNDP and ethnic networks and substantial external support. Instead, mobilisation functioned as a secondary consolidation factor, stabilising territorial control, and sustaining large offensives, with coercive recruitment emerging only later (2024–2025) due to a crucial need for more manpower. While evidence is clearer for the later years and recruitment operated in interaction with other mechanisms, the best interpretation is that mobilisation was essential for consolidation and quasi-state building, but not the principal cause of M23's reemergence.

5. 6. Comparative Assessment

Taken together, the three explanatory factors: external support, organisational learning, and mobilisation, interact to explain M23's resurgence, but their causal relevance differs. External support emerges as the primary enabler, providing the resources, sanctuary, training, and operational capacity necessary for the insurgency to reconstitute after years of dormancy. Without this "fuel," neither organisational learning nor mobilisation could have translated into a viable military and quasi-state apparatus. However, external support alone does not mechanically produce successful resurgence, as evidenced by other Rwandan-aligned armed actors in eastern Congo, such as post-CNDP splinter factions after 2009 and the first phase of the M23 rebellion, that failed

to reconstitute durable insurgencies due to internal fragmentation and weak organisational coherence (Stearns, 2012, pp. 37–42).

Organisational learning hence functions as the engine, an enabling factor converting these external resources into durable structures: preserved leadership, strategic adaptations, governance capacity, and battlefield competence allowed M23 to operationalise external support efficiently and sustainably. In contrast, mobilisation played a complementary and secondary role. By combining selective incentives, transactional governance, hybrid organisational forms, and later coercive recruitment, M23 consolidated territorial control, staffed administrations, and sustained prolonged offensives. However, as shown, mobilisation alone did not spark the resurgence; rather it primarily scaled and institutionalised gains already made possible by external support and refined through organisational learning.

These explanatory factors do not operate in isolation. External support and organisational learning reinforced each other: resources from patrons could be effectively absorbed and deployed thanks to institutional memory, disciplined command, and governance innovation. Likewise, mobilisation was conditioned on the structural and political opportunities created by these other factors, exemplifying the interdependence highlighted in process-tracing logic (Collier, 2011). The empirical evidence for each factor consistently points to external support as the necessary condition, organisational learning as a sufficient condition for translating that support into operational capacity, and mobilisation as a factor of consolidation.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to research how a defeated insurgent organisation could reemerge in the same conflict environment with markedly enhanced military and political effectiveness. By examining how, rather than why, insurgent groups reconstitute after collapse, and by applying a theory-guided framework of external support, organisational learning, and mobilisation to the case of M23, the study makes two primary contributions. Firstly, it provides a structured causal account of a major contemporary resurgence, demonstrating that M23's return was the outcome of a specific interactive sequence in which external resources enabled reconstitution, organisational adaptation

transformed these resources into durable capacity, and mobilisation strategies consolidated advances. Secondly, it provides theoretical understanding by determining the factors through which defeated groups adapt and return, moving beyond structural explanations, and thereby opening the "black box" between insurgent collapse and renewed effectiveness.

The contribution of this study lies less in identifying novel causal factors than in specifying their causal ordering. The analysis demonstrates that organisational learning and mobilisation did not independently trigger M23's resurgence, but rather operated as conditional mechanisms activated once external support had restored military viability. This sequencing matters theoretically, as it clarifies a boundary condition for theories of insurgent adaptation: under conditions of decisive external sponsorship, internal dynamics primarily function as transmission and consolidation factors that allow insurgent groups to survive periods of dormancy and reemerge as formidable political and military actors.

7. Limitations and Future Research

While this study has traced the explanatory factors behind M23's resurgence, several limitations must be acknowledged. The causal sequence identified is most applicable to insurgent groups operating under comparable scope conditions such as state fragility, porous borders, and access to external resources and should not be assumed to apply uniformly across all insurgent resurgences. The analysis is also constrained by the empirical challenges of studying an ongoing and highly opaque conflict. Reliance on open-source reports from the UN, NGOs, and media, while necessary, means the evidence is filtered through their information collecting capacity. This limits the ability to trace all micro-level causal mechanisms with equal precision, particularly regarding internal decision-making and covert mechanisms. Finally, the focus on 2021 onwards, while methodologically sound for process tracing, necessarily treats the dormant period (2013-2021) as a background condition, potentially under-analysing potential groundwork for reconstitution laid during those years.

These limitations open a clear path for future research. A critical next step is systematic comparative analysis, particularly with externally backed armed groups that failed to achieve sustained resurgence, to more precisely delineate the boundary conditions under which

organisational learning and mobilisation retain independent explanatory power. Further work is also needed on the dormant phase of insurgencies, which remains empirically underexplored but is important for understanding long-term survival, adaptation, and eventual resurgence. Finally, the findings invite policy-oriented research into the conditions under which peace agreements and post-conflict governance arrangements can disrupt the interaction between external patronage and insurgent adaptation, thereby reducing the likelihood of renewed rebellion.

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