The increasing connection between organised political violence and the struggle for control of economic resources seems to have emerged as one of the distinguishing characteristics of conflicts in Africa after the cold war. This essay considers the DRC’s internationalised civil conflict in which the Kabila government supported by its Zimbabwean, Angolan and Namibian allies, is pitted against Rwanda, Uganda and myriad local insurgent groups occupying more than half of the country. It explores the roles of economic resources as a possible motivation for foreign belligerents in the war, and questions the extent to which their conduct is actually informed by genuine security and political reasons, as portrayed in official explanations of the war.

The research specifically probes whether unspoken expectations of personal benefits on the part of foreign states’ elites accounts for intervention and the strategies adopted in the war. It analyses the politics of resource control among foreign interventionist states’ military and political class, and considers whether this explains the prolongation of hostilities.

My paper argues that although the initial impetus for intervention by Uganda and Rwanda was provided by the threat of transborder incursions by insurgents based in the DRC, the ultimate explanation for the prolonged stay of the RPA and UPDF in the Congo will have to be sought in the realm of opportunistic exploitation, to wit, resource expropriation both for war financing and elites’ own material aggrandisement. The paper investigates first, the complex security questions confronting the Ugandan and Rwandan leaderships at the initial stages of the conflict. It then probes the interplay of factors that led to the emergence of “resource scramble” as a key dynamic in the conflict. The final section will show how resource control politics has manifested itself, and concludes with an analysis of the “Kisangani Debacle” in which two historical allies, though confronting similar security threats, fell out with each other and clashed in a frenzy of resource plunder that produced one of the most intense and destructive battles in contemporary civil war.

With regards to Zimbabwe, we investigate the links between military intervention and economic penetration of Congo’s markets by foreign states’ business interests. It seeks to know why Zimbabwe led the southern African group of intervenors even when the regional superpower, South Africa, abstained from direct military involvement. Did Zimbabwe’s leadership intervened with a view to exploiting the DRC’s immense economic potential, or did commercial interests only follow in order to take advantage of the security network provided by the military? What concrete economic gains have accrued to Zimbabwe? Or have the “spoils of war” only gone to satisfying the unspoken quest of state elites for personal benefits, with the masses bearing the cost of war?

The study demonstrates that the Congo war, which began as an objective political contest, later exposed the fragility of regional ethnic, political and security relations, and
ultimately produced a military stalemate in which pursuit of economic gains became paramount. The research adopts a qualitative approach based on documentary sources such as books, periodicals and official publications, as well as a first-hand study involving interactions with the Congolese grassroots and interviews with concerned states’ officials in London and New York.