

KINSHASA ON THE POTOMAC**Washington gets 'Congo fatigue' as DRC's political dysfunction threatens minerals deal**

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Democratic Republic of the Congo President Felix Tshisekedi attends a meeting with US President Joe Biden, at a Carrinho facility, near Lobito, Angola, 4 December, 2024. (Reuters/Elizabeth Frantz)

Duelling lobbying campaigns by Congolese rivals are leaving American officials dazed and confused.

The chairman of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee got a front-row lesson in Congolese politics last week.

purportedly working for President **Félix Tshisekedi**'s entourage reached out with an enticing offer.

A bevy of heavy-hitters from the DRC – including foreign minister Thérèse Wagner, minister of mines Kizito Pakabomba and minister for international trade Julien Paluku – were in town: Would Mast meet with them?

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Intrigued, the Florida Republican messaged his 48 colleagues on the committee – Republicans and Democrats alike – to invite them to a 6 March briefing with the Congolese visitors, and then promptly cancelled after the promised delegation failed to materialise amid rumours of an impending government reshuffle.

It was just the most recent snafu in a disjointed Congolese political class’s latest diplomatic attempt to counter Rwandan-backed M23 rebels as they rampage through the eastern part of the country.

Sowing chaos

Banking on America’s appetite for the DRC’s mineral riches, a throng of anxious Congolese officials, enterprising foreign lobbyists and ambitious US politicians has been shuffling between Washington and Kinshasa in recent weeks, peddling access to power, dangling an elusive minerals-for-security deal and sowing additional chaos in an already confusing situation.

“It all boils down to the idea that success has many fathers and failure is a bastard. There are a lot of people that want to have success here and they’re all ... trying to get their little footholds dug in,” Mast tells *The Africa Report* in a hallway interview on Capitol Hill.

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The chaotic influence operation has left US officials sceptical that a minerals deal is workable.

“Right now, they’re kind of waiting for there to be some clarity around who’s who, so to speak,” says Aaron Sean Poynton, one of several American lobbyists registered with the US



Rival offers

An Army veteran and founder of defence consulting firm Omnipoynt Solutions, Poynton represents the interests of Congolese Senator Pierre Kanda Kalambayi, the chairman of the Committee on Defence, Security and Border Protection. He is also co-founder of the Africa-US Business Council along with his Kinshasa-based partner Patrice Majondo-Mwamba, a former Texas Tech college football player who ran for president in DRC in 2023.

Touting a verbal contract for \$1.4m with Kalambayi, Poynton has written to several top US officials in recent weeks – including Secretary of State Marco Rubio, national security adviser Michael Waltz, Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick and congressional leaders, offering to set up a visit by Tshisekedi to discuss US security guarantees in exchange for access to Congolese minerals.

“What’s on the table is mining concessions, deep water port operation and to work with the US to build a strategic national stockpile of critical minerals that are of importance to US national security and economic interests in return for help getting their security situation under control,” Poynton tells *The Africa Report*.

“I don’t expect there to be boots on the ground or American bloodshed, but certainly there are things the US can do regarding training and equipping that can help them defend their borders.”

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However, Kalambayi’s actual ability to deliver the Congolese president – never mind a full-fledged minerals deal – is an open question. When contacted by *The Africa Report*, the senator said his initiative was a “personal” one. He declined to give more details.

Even as the senator’s US agent was blanketing Washington offices with his potential offer over the past few weeks, Guy-Robert Lukama, the chairman of Congolese state mining company Gécamines was in town with a much more circumscribed bid. He was seeking US investment in copper-cobalt mining operator Chemaf after rejecting a bid by China’s defence conglomerate Norinco.



Lukama has his own influence operation in the US, having signed a \$75,000-a-month contract with Mercury Public Affairs in March 2024 as he sought to present a new clean face of Congolese mining following the ouster of his predecessor Albert Yuma, an ally of former president Joseph Kabila. Registered agents on the account include Congressman Toby Moffett, Democrat of Connecticut.

Adding more lobbyists to the mix

Poynton tells *The Africa Report* that he trusts his client, but acknowledges that he's had no personal contact with the Congolese head of state.

Following breathless media reports about Poynton's outreach to the Trump administration, rival lobbyists cautioned that not all is what it seems.

"Many articles and rumours are circulating about the US-DRC relationship," Karl Von Batten wrote on X on 10 March. "We advise the media to consult with the DRC government and its official representatives for clarity before printing single-sourced articles."

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Von Batten helped set up the 6 March congressional meeting that was eventually cancelled. Already a registered lobbyist for the Congolese ministry of mines since December 2024, he is in the process of registering with the US Department of Justice as a foreign agent for Tshisekedi, deputy chief of staff André Wameso and presidential adviser François Muamba, according to [documents obtained](#) by *The Africa Report*.

A leader in the Washington Republican party, Von Batten contributed \$50,000 to the Republican National Committee in January. His firm, Von Batten-Montague-York, will "advocate for the interests of the DRC against Rwandan actions and lobby for a mineral mining partnership between the US and the DRC," according to the lobbying filing.

While the Congolese ministers did not end up travelling to the US, Wameso did lead a smaller delegation to Washington last week. They met with staffers for chairman Mast as well as top House Foreign Affairs Democrat Gregory Meeks of New York and Africa panel ranking member Sara Jacobs of California.

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Other lobbyists in the mix include Joseph Szlavik, a veteran of the George H. W. Bush administration and longtime Africa hand whose firm Scribe Strategies & Advisors just re-upped a \$70,000-a-month contract with the Congolese ministry of communications and media. Ballard Partners, led by former Trump Florida lobbyist Brian Ballard, also re-upped a \$100,000-a-month contract with the ministry in January.

Rounding out the foreign influence peddlers is Kacy Grine, a French adviser to Saudi Prince Al Waleed bin Talal Al Saud who, as reported by *Africa Intelligence*, helped the Congolese government negotiate a deal with Russian diamond mining company Alrosa. Grine has also been observed pitching a minerals deal to the Americans but has not registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA).

American power play

The Americans have their own envoys who are also adding to the confusion.

On 24 February, Congressman Lance Gooden missed votes on Capitol Hill because he was 10,500km away in Brazzaville meeting with [Republic of the Congo](#) President Denis Sassou Nguesso. The Texas Republican told local media he was carrying a message from President [Donald Trump](#) regarding regional peace efforts, despite not sitting on the House Foreign Affairs Committee or having shown much interest in Africa previously.

Another Texas lawmaker, Ronny Jackson, the physician to the president under Barack Obama and during Trump's first term, is expected in Kinshasa next week, several sources in Washington and the DRC tell *The Africa Report*. Neither congressional office responded to requests for comment.

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Eager to find out what's what, Trump last week selected his daughter Tiffany Trump's father-in-law, Massad Boulos to serve as his envoy to the Great Lakes. The Lebanese-American businessman already serves as Trump's senior adviser for Arab Affairs and is expected to travel to the DRC, Rwanda, and perhaps Uganda as soon as he secures a diplomatic passport and the right security clearances, a source close to Trump tells *The Africa Report*.

Boulos is expected to serve in an informal role rather than as a full-fledged special envoy, which would require Senate confirmation.

Rwanda gains an edge

The Congolese disarray is playing straight into the hands of the DRC's much smaller – and much better organised – geopolitical foe, Rwanda.

The chairman of the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Africa, Republican Chris Smith of New Jersey, tells *The Africa Report* that he was hoping to meet with emissaries of both countries on 6 March.

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Instead, only the Rwandan side showed up, represented by Ambassador Mathilde Mukantabana and Mauro De Lorenzo, an American-born former Great Lakes researcher at the conservative American Enterprise Institute who is now President [Paul Kagame](#)'s discreet and highly effective international fixer.

“I was ready to go. The idea behind that was that side, that side,” Smith says. “They’ve got to get their act together.”

He says the Congolese absence was a “disappointment” and that a minerals deal remains elusive.

“I haven’t seen it,” he says. “That’s the problem.”

Already well entrenched in Washington, the Rwandans are looking to **further deepen their influence** after the Trump administration slapped **sanctions on the minister of state for**

Several sources tell *The Africa Report* that Rigau is looking to hire lobbying firm Poynton Solutions. The firm is run by Daniel Vajdich, a former national security adviser to Texas Senator Ted Cruz, the new chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on Africa. Vajdich would not confirm the rumours.

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Cruz's office is already close to the Rwandans, having worked with Ambassador Mukantabana to host an introductory meeting with envoys from 19 nations and the African Union last month on Capitol Hill. Notably absent from the 18 February gathering was Congolese Ambassador Marie-Hélène Mathey Boo Lowumba.

"It would be great if we all worked together," a frustrated Poynton says. "Wouldn't that be amazing?"

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