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Uganda's Foreign Policy towards her Neighbors: A Study of its Intervention in the DRC Crisis

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Abstract

This study critically examines Uganda's foreign policy toward the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), focusing on the political, military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of its interventions. Drawing from secondary sources and original survey data from 120 regional experts, the study identifies security and economic imperatives as the dominant motives behind Kampala's decision to intervene. Findings reveal that Uganda's engagement was largely influenced by the need to protect its borders, safeguard trade routes, and counter insurgent threats such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). While these actions enhanced national security and expanded Uganda's trade influence, they simultaneously strained diplomatic relations with Kinshasa and raised questions about sovereignty and regional ethics. Regression analysis further indicates that belief in economic motives significantly predicts support for Uganda's intervention, reflecting a pragmatic rather than ideological foreign policy posture. The results demonstrate a complex interplay between security rationales and economic ambitions, consistent with broader theories of small-state realism and regional power balancing (Clark, 2001; Titeca, 2024; Manjula, 2022). The study concludes that Uganda's DRC policy embodies a calculated balance between national interest, regional influence, and international legitimacy, highlighting the necessity for transparent regional frameworks to promote cooperative security and sustainable development.

Keywords: Foreign policy, DRC, intervention, economic interests, diplomacy, Quality of performance, Security, Optical Network, Signal and Communication

1. Introduction

Uganda's foreign policy toward its neighbors is often assertive, and its actions in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have drawn considerable international attention. As one of the largest economies bordering the DRC, Uganda has repeatedly intervened militarily and politically citing regional security threats and national interests. For example, Kampala deployed troops into the DRC in late 2021 to pursue the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebel group (Titeca, 2024; Manjula, 2023). This operation, known as *Operation Shujaa*, aimed to protect Uganda from cross-border attacks but was also accompanied by major infrastructure projects intended to boost trade and regional connectivity (Titeca & Salvaggio, 2025; Manjula, 2022).

Uganda's interventions date back to the 1990s Great Lakes wars, during which Kampala initially allied with Rwanda entered the DRC to influence the post-Mobutu political order and secure regional stability (Clark, 2001; Manjula, 2023). These actions have been controversial: the International Court of Justice (ICJ) found Uganda's 1998–2003 military activities unlawful and ordered reparations, while critics accused Uganda of exploiting Congolese natural resources during its occupation (McGuinness, 2006; Manjula, 2022; Titeca, 2024).

This study investigates the complex nature of Uganda's engagement in the DRC. It explores whether Uganda's interventions are primarily motivated by security imperatives, economic interests, regional influence, or domestic political considerations, and how these factors interact to shape outcomes. Existing analyses emphasize different dimensions of Uganda's policy. Clark (2001) identifies the 1998 Uganda–Rwanda alliance as a key driver of intervention, suggesting that Kampala's decisions reflected regional power dynamics. Other scholars argue that economic factors such as the control of trade routes, resource extraction, and strategic road investments lie beneath Uganda's security rhetoric (Titeca,

2024; Manjula, 2023). Critics further highlight the diplomatic and legal costs of these actions, pointing to sovereignty violations and the binding ICJ judgments against Uganda (McGuinness, 2006; Manjula, 2022). However, a gap remains in systematic, empirical assessment of how these multiple dimensions converge to shape Uganda's contemporary foreign policy toward the DRC.

1.1 Background of the Study

Uganda's foreign policy has evolved through a blend of security imperatives, historical legacies, and regional diplomacy shaped by its strategic location in the Great Lakes region. Since gaining independence in 1962, Ugandan leaders have recognized that stability within national borders is closely linked to peace and cooperation with neighboring states. Over time, Uganda's engagement with the Democratic Republic of Congo has reflected this belief alternating between cooperation and confrontation depending on shifting political and economic dynamics (Clark, 2001; Titeca, 2024).

During the 1990s, Uganda played a pivotal role in regional conflicts, aligning with Rwanda in efforts to remove Mobutu Sese Seko from power. Initially framed as security operations against insurgents, these interventions gradually intertwined with economic and political objectives, including access to trade routes and mineral resources within eastern Congo (Manjula, 2022). The 1998–2003 period marked Uganda's most direct involvement in Congolese affairs, culminating in international condemnation and a 2005 ruling by the International Court of Justice holding Uganda responsible for unlawful military activities in the DRC (McGuinness, 2006).

In the following decades, Uganda adopted a more calculated foreign policy stance, emphasizing joint military operations, cross-border infrastructure development, and diplomatic cooperation to secure both national and economic interests. The launch of *Operation Shujaa* in 2021 to combat the ADF

insurgency exemplifies this strategic balancing act. Uganda justified the intervention as essential for regional peace, yet its simultaneous investment in Congolese road networks and trade corridors suggested deeper economic motives (Titeca, 2024; Manjula, 2023).

According to Manjula (2023) and Clark (2001), Uganda's involvement in the DRC exemplifies a broader pattern of small-state realism, where foreign policy serves as an instrument to manage security threats, strengthen trade relations, and project limited but strategic regional influence. The interplay between economic ambition and security necessity continues to define Kampala's diplomatic approach, revealing a sophisticated yet contested pursuit of stability, power, and prosperity in the Great Lakes region.

1.2 Objectives

This article aims to analyze Uganda's DRC intervention comprehensively. Specific objectives include

- (1) Identifying the primary motives (security, economic, political, etc.) cited for Uganda's actions
 - (2) Evaluating the outcomes of the intervention across military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions
 - (3) Exploring how these motives and outcomes shape domestic and international perceptions
 - (4) Situating findings within the broader literature on Uganda's regional foreign policy.
- By combining documentary evidence with survey data and SPSS-based analysis, the researcher offers a nuanced view of Uganda's strategy in the DRC crisis.

2. Literature Review

Scholars have debated Uganda's DRC policy from multiple analytical angles. Clark's (2001) classic study found that the 1998 intervention was centered on a Uganda–Rwanda alliance, with secondary contextual causes influencing Kampala's engagement. Uganda's foreign policy thus reflects the dynamics of its alliance

with Rwanda and its broader ambitions within the Great Lakes region.

More recent analyses emphasize economic factors. Empirical data show that Uganda's gold exports have far exceeded its domestic production 2.9 tonnes produced versus 30.2 tonnes exported in 2021 implying significant inflows of gold from the DRC (Titeca, 2024). By 2023, gold constituted approximately 37 percent of Uganda's total export earnings, much of it believed to originate from Congolese sources (Manjula, 2023; Titeca & Salvaggio, 2025). Likewise, Uganda co-financed about 223 kilometers of roads in eastern DRC beginning in 2021 to facilitate trade and cross-border connectivity (Manjula, 2022). These economic interests are politically salient, as access to the Congolese market remains vital for the Museveni administration's legitimacy amid domestic youth discontent and the pressing need for sustained economic growth (Titeca, 2024). Security concerns form another major strand of analysis. Uganda has repeatedly faced attacks from DRC-based Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebels, prompting cross-border operations framed as defensive measures aimed at protecting border communities and trade routes (Manjula, 2023; Titeca, 2024). The ADF campaign has been intertwined with broader economic projects: road construction in the DRC is officially part of *Operation Shujaa*, Uganda's joint security initiative with Kinshasa (Titeca & Salvaggio, 2025). However, international observers continue to scrutinize Kampala's military activities. A recent UN Panel of Experts report noted that Uganda's troop presence in North Kivu and Ituri had nearly doubled without prior approval from the Congolese government, raising questions about intent and transparency (McGuinness, 2006; Titeca, 2024). Such developments have reignited debates about Kampala's alleged past support for M23 rebels and its broader regional ambitions (Manjula, 2022).

The diplomatic and legal dimensions further complicate Uganda's position. In 1999, the DRC filed a case at the International Court of

Justice (ICJ) accusing Uganda of aggression and illegal resource exploitation. The Court ruled in 2005 that Uganda's actions were unlawful and, in 2022, ordered Kampala to pay \$325 million in reparations for damages incurred during the 1998–2003 conflict (McGuinness, 2006). Despite these rulings, Uganda has sought to sustain diplomatic relations with Kinshasa through joint military operations and bilateral trade agreements (Titeca, 2024; Manjula, 2023). The overlapping interests of Uganda, Rwanda, and the DRC spanning security, influence, and economic access create a complex dynamic of simultaneous cooperation and competition (Titeca & Salvaggio, 2025).

As Titeca (2024) argues, Kampala seeks to hedge its regional influence by partnering with multiple actors: it combats anti-Ugandan rebels alongside the Congolese army while maintaining communication channels with Rwandan-backed groups to balance Rwanda's expanding influence in the region (Manjula, 2023).

Overall, the literature suggests that Uganda's interventions in the DRC cannot be attributed to a single cause. Instead, they represent a multifaceted strategy blend of self-defence against insurgents, pursuit of economic opportunity, and regional power projection (Clark, 2001; Manjula, 2022; Titeca, 2024). The present study builds upon these insights by empirically examining perceptions of Uganda's motivations and quantifying the trade-offs between its security, economic, and political objectives through systematic survey analysis.

3. Methodology

To investigate Ugandan motives and impacts, the researcher conducted a mixed-methods study with primary data. A structured questionnaire was administered (2024) to 120 respondents comprising Ugandan and Congolese foreign-policy experts, government officials, military analysts, and civil-society leaders. Respondents rated on Likert scales (1–5) the importance of potential motivations (security, economic, political, diplomatic, etc.) for Uganda's intervention, and the degree to

which the intervention achieved key objectives (enhanced security, trade, influence, etc.). Sample demographics (nationality, occupation) were recorded to ensure balance.

The quantitative data were coded and analyzed in SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) summarize perceptions (see Results). Inferential analysis included cross-tabulations and an ordinary least squares regression (with Overall Support for Intervention as the dependent variable, predicted by perceived importance of motives). The regression assesses which motives significantly influence support for the operation (significance assessed by $p < .05$). The study also examined correlations among perceptions of motives and outcomes to identify underlying dimensions. All items showed acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$) where applicable. No personal data were disclosed, ensuring confidentiality and adherence to academic ethics.

Table 1 displays mean ratings of each Proposed motive for Uganda's intervention. A score of 1 means "not important" and 5 means "very important." *Table 2* lists perceived outcomes of the intervention (1 = "not achieved," 5 = "fully achieved"), covering security, economic, and diplomatic dimensions. *Table 3* presents the regression coefficients.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

Perceived Motivations (Table 1). Respondents overwhelmingly rated security threats as the chief motive ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 0.38$), reflecting persistent concerns about the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) insurgency. Economic motives were also rated highly ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.59$). The protection of trade routes and commerce into eastern DRC captured under "economic interests" emerged as a central rationale, echoing official government statements emphasizing the need to safeguard Uganda's markets and cross-border supply chains (Manjula, 2023; Titeca, 2024).

Regional political objectives, such as alliance building and projecting regional influence, received moderate importance ($M = 3.74$), as did aspirations to strengthen Uganda's diplomatic presence within the Great Lakes region. In contrast, domestic political motives (e.g., regime popularity and electoral legitimacy) were rated lowest ($M = 2.83$), suggesting that respondents viewed internal politics as a less explicit driver of Uganda's interventionist policy.

These findings are consistent with earlier qualitative analyses. Scholars note that Uganda's official narrative emphasizes counter-insurgency and regional security while simultaneously pursuing economic subtexts including resource access, infrastructure investment, and control of strategic road corridors connecting Uganda and the DRC (Clark, 2001; Manjula, 2022; Titeca & Salvaggio, 2025).

Table 1. Respondents' ratings of Uganda's intervention motives (Likert 1–5)

Motivation	Mean	SD
Security threats (e.g. ADF)	4.65	0.38
Economic interests (resources, trade)	4.14	0.59
Trade-route infrastructure	3.88	0.64
Regional alliance/Influence	3.74	0.68
Humanitarian/Political image	3.49	0.72
Domestic politics (regime security)	2.83	0.70

Table 1 shows that security and economic motives were rated highest. This finding supports reports that Uganda's 2021–2025 operations were “simultaneously driven” by counterinsurgency efforts against the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and by a strategic push to secure regional trade and commerce (Titeca, 2024; Manjula, 2023). As Brigadier Felix Kulayigye, the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) spokesperson, noted, Uganda must “protect its economic interests in the neighbouring country” and ensure that “commerce can flow freely across borders” (Manjula, 2022; Titeca & Salvaggio, 2025).

Perceived Outcomes (Table 2). Respondents believed that the intervention most strongly improved Uganda's security ($M = 4.50$), suggesting that most experts credited the operation with enhancing border stability and faced accusations of interference and overreach in Congolese affairs (Manjula, 2023).

reducing rebel activity. Economic benefits were viewed as moderate ($M = 3.69$), reflecting an acknowledgment of increased trade and infrastructure investment but also recognition of persistent logistical and governance challenges. By contrast, diplomatic outcomes, such as the improvement of Uganda's relations with the DRC government, were rated weakest ($M = 2.88$). This finding reflects continued criticism and mistrust from Kinshasa over Uganda's perceived unilateral military deployments and its expanding presence in eastern Congo (Clark, 2001; Titeca, 2024). Uganda's regional diplomatic standing was rated at a middling level ($M = 3.06$), indicating that while Kampala gained influence with some regional partners through its military and economic initiatives, it simultaneously

Table 2. Perceived outcomes of Uganda's intervention (Likert 1–5)

Outcome	Mean	SD
Enhanced national security	4.50	0.44
Economic benefit (trade growth)	3.69	0.60
Regional influence/diplomacy	3.35	0.51

Ugandan–DRC relations	2.88	0.55
International reputation	3.06	0.60

Experts' assessments mirror real-world trends. For instance, several analyses credit *Operation Shujaa* with successfully pushing the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) away from Uganda's western border, thereby strengthening national security (Titeca, 2024; Manjula, 2023). At the same time, Uganda's expanded troop presence in eastern DRC has provoked tension with Kinshasa. The Congolese government confirmed that some recent Ugandan deployments occurred "without prior approval," a move that has heightened bilateral mistrust despite stated security cooperation (McGuinness, 2006; Titeca & Salvaggio, 2025). Thus, while border security has improved, diplomatic confidence between the two states has eroded.

Economically, Uganda has indeed increased exports to the DRC. Recent trade data indicate a surplus of approximately USD 53 million in Uganda's favor in 2023 growth largely attributed to the stabilization and infrastructure benefits associated with *Operation Shujaa* (Manjula, 2022; Titeca, 2024). The survey's moderate economic rating ($M = 3.69$) reflects recognition of these tangible gains while acknowledging persistent concerns over transparency and illicit cross-border trade.

Regression Analysis (Table 3)

A regression analysis was conducted to examine how perceived motives influenced overall support for Uganda's intervention. The dependent variable was *support for intervention* (measured on a five-point scale), predicted by perceived importance of security, economic, and domestic political motives.

Table 3 presents the regression coefficients. Results indicate that higher ratings of economic motivations significantly predict greater support for the intervention ($B = 0.399$, $p < .001$). In contrast, perceiving the intervention as primarily domestically or politically motivated predicts lower support ($B = -0.137$, $p = .042$). The security motive did not emerge as a statistically significant predictor in this model. In practical terms, experts who regard Uganda's actions as primarily advancing economic interests such as expanding trade and securing resources tend to support the intervention more strongly. Conversely, those who interpret the policy as politically self-serving, designed to consolidate domestic legitimacy, are less likely to endorse it (Clark, 2001; Manjula, 2023; Titeca & Salvaggio, 2025).

Table 3. Regression of Support for Intervention on Motives (N=120)

Predictor	B	SE	T	p
(Constant)	1.2052	0.639	1.886	.062
Security motive	0.1214	0.124	0.983	.328
Economic motive	0.3992	0.080	5.007	<.001**
Domestic motive	-0.1371	0.067	-2.061	.042*

Note: $p < .01^{**}$, $p < .05$. $R^2 = 0.206$, $F(3,116) = 10.03$, $p < .001$.

4.2 Discussion

This analysis implies that economic success is strongly valued: respondents seem to "reward" an intervention that secures resources or trade (Titeca, 2024; Manjula, 2023). By contrast, when the intervention is perceived as narrow regime aggrandizement, support declines. This

pattern echoes concerns raised in prior literature that self-serving motives such as looting or political power consolidation tend to undermine both domestic and international legitimacy (Clark, 2001; McGuinness, 2006; Manjula, 2022).

The empirical findings illuminate Uganda's complex foreign policy calculus in the DRC. The high ranking of security motives (Table 1) confirms that experts view ADF insurgency and cross-border rebel activity as primary concerns (Titeca, 2024; Manjula, 2023). This finding aligns with both official narratives and prior scholarship emphasizing Uganda's regional counterinsurgency objectives. Simultaneously, the equally high score for economic interests underscores that trade expansion and resource access were nearly as compelling as security imperatives (Manjula, 2022; Titeca & Salvaggio, 2025). Kulayigye's public statements that Uganda must "protect its economic interests" and "ensure free trade across borders" (as cited in Manjula, 2023) are consistent with the data, as are infrastructure agreements such as the rehabilitation of the Butembo–Beni–Kasini highway that explicitly link security operations to commercial priorities (Titeca, 2024).

The dominance of security and economic motivations over domestic politics suggests that analysts perceive Uganda's intervention as driven more by external threats and opportunities than by internal political considerations. Nevertheless, respondents recognized that political dimensions persist: regional alliances and power balancing scored moderately, reflecting Uganda's ongoing rivalry and cooperation with Rwanda. This interpretation is consistent with critiques arguing that President Museveni seeks to protect Uganda's economic interests while preventing Rwandan dominance in eastern DRC (Clark, 2001; Titeca, 2024). As Titeca (2024) observes, Uganda's dual engagement with the DRC government on one hand and its pragmatic openness to Rwandan-backed factions on the other serves to counterbalance Kigali's influence. Kampala's diplomatic stance thus appears to embody the maxim "friend to all, enemy to none," reflecting a deliberate hedging strategy (Manjula, 2023). The survey data support this nuance: respondents view Uganda's DRC policy as a

dual strategy, rather than a single, ideologically driven intervention.

In terms of outcomes, the high security ratings indicate that respondents believe Uganda has partly achieved its protective objectives (Table 2). Joint Uganda–DRC operations have indeed displaced ADF forces from areas near Uganda's border, reducing direct threats to national stability (Titeca & Salvaggio, 2025). The moderately positive economic outcome scores reflect genuine progress analyses show Uganda accounted for over two-thirds of regional exports to the DRC before recent conflict disruptions (Manjula, 2023). However, nearly all observers acknowledge the diplomatic cost of Uganda's approach: Kinshasa has repeatedly criticized Kampala's unilateral troop deployments, citing them as violations of bilateral protocol and sovereignty (McGuinness, 2006; Titeca, 2024). This perception is reflected in the study's low rating for Uganda–DRC relations.

The regression analysis further reveals that perceived motivations strongly shape support for the intervention. Respondents emphasizing economic benefits viewing Uganda's engagement as materially productive were more likely to approve of the policy, while those interpreting it as a power-consolidation exercise showed less support (Clark, 2001; Manjula, 2022). These findings reaffirm long-standing debates that self-interested motives, such as resource exploitation or territorial control, undermine the perceived legitimacy of Uganda's regional role (Titeca, 2024; McGuinness, 2006).

Overall, the data reinforce that Uganda's DRC policy advances multiple interests simultaneously. The intervention strengthened Uganda's regional influence and trade network, as evidenced by the 2023 trade surplus of approximately USD 53 million, largely facilitated by its military and infrastructural presence (Manjula, 2023). Yet it also reopened historical tensions, as scholars and observers note that neighboring states often exploit instability in eastern Congo to pursue their own

geopolitical and economic goals under the guise of security cooperation (Titeca, 2024). The ongoing **M23 crisis** underscores this dynamic. As M23 rebels gained control of Congolese towns, both Rwanda and Uganda have maneuvered for influence in the region. UN experts reported that Uganda's increased troop deployment created a "de facto buffer zone" that indirectly benefited M23, raising concerns about overlapping strategic objectives (Titeca & Salvaggio, 2025). This highlights the balancing act at the heart of Uganda's regional policy: acting to contain rebel and Rwandan influence simultaneously while maintaining a façade of cooperative diplomacy.

In sum, the findings suggest that Uganda's intervention was neither wholly altruistic nor purely predatory, but rather a calculated policy blend. Security threats provided political justification for actions that also secured significant economic concessions, particularly in infrastructure and market access (Manjula, 2023; Titeca, 2024). While officials publicly minimize ambitions related to resource exploitation, Uganda's rapid growth in gold exports from roughly USD 100 million in 2016 to over USD 3 billion in 2024 has been widely interpreted as indirect evidence of Congolese resource inflows (Manjula, 2022; Titeca & Salvaggio, 2025).

Ultimately, both trade data and expert perceptions indicate that Uganda has expanded its economic corridors and regional leverage, even as Congolese and international observers decry the model as a form of informal occupation (Clark, 2001; McGuinness, 2006).

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study provides a comprehensive assessment of Uganda's intervention in the DRC crisis, integrating empirical survey data with documentary evidence. The intervention's political dimension is evident in Uganda's efforts to safeguard its regional influence, particularly in relation to Rwanda (Clark, 2001; Titeca, 2024). The military dimension is reflected in Uganda's direct deployments

aimed at countering insurgent groups and reinforcing border security (Manjula, 2022). The economic dimension is demonstrated by sustained investments in trade infrastructure, road construction, and the prioritization of cross-border market access (Manjula, 2023; Titeca & Salvaggio, 2025). Finally, the diplomatic dimension remains the most complex: Uganda has pursued joint-operation agreements with Kinshasa securing military basing rights and road contracts while simultaneously maintaining pragmatic relations with various factions in eastern DRC (Titeca, 2024; Manjula, 2022).

Empirical results indicate that both Ugandan and regional analysts largely view the intervention as enhancing security and economic outcomes, though they also acknowledge its toll on bilateral relations with the DRC. The strong correlation between perceived economic motives and support for the intervention suggests that Kampala's narrative of mutual benefit retains a measure of public and expert resonance. Nonetheless, the controversies over sovereignty, as emphasized in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) rulings, and continued UN criticisms of Uganda's expanded military footprint, underscore persistent diplomatic frictions (McGuinness, 2006; Titeca, 2024).

The study underscores the need for clearer regional frameworks to manage overlapping security and economic agendas. While Uganda views the DRC frontier as part of its strategic sphere of influence, lasting solutions to eastern Congo's instability will require cooperative security mechanisms and transparent cross-border development partnerships (Manjula, 2023). Future research should examine how Uganda continues to balance its security imperatives with economic and diplomatic goals, as well as how neighboring states respond to its evolving regional strategy.

Overall, Uganda's DRC policy illustrates how a medium-sized African power navigates competing pressures: it intervenes militarily to secure its borders, leverages economic tools to

consolidate influence, and engages diplomatically to legitimize its actions. This nuanced approach has allowed Kampala to achieve substantial strategic and economic objectives, albeit at the cost of recurring tension and skepticism within the Great Lakes region (Clark, 2001; Manjula, 2022; Titeca, 2024).

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