

# Complicity or Strategy? U.S. Military Aid to Uganda Amid Growing Domestic Repression

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## Abstract

*This paper critically examines the implications of US military assistance to Uganda amid rising authoritarianism and deteriorating human rights under President Yoweri Museveni. US military aid to Uganda has long been justified on the grounds of counterterrorism, regional stability, and peacekeeping efforts. The administration's domestic political repression, which includes the suppression of political opposition, civil society organizations, and media freedom, raises significant ethical and strategic concerns about the United States Government's continuous support for the Ugandan regime. The paper explores the tension between US strategic interests, particularly in counterterrorism and regional stability, and the normative commitment to democratic governance and human rights. Documentary analysis was used to solicit information from official US government documents, congressional reports, State Department human rights assessments, and Ugandan domestic political trends. The paper argues that US assistance, while advancing counterterrorism objectives, contributes to state-led repression, which undermines democratic institutions and fuels public discontent. The paper also outlines how US military assistance undermines its credibility in promoting human rights and democracy in Uganda and examines whether security assistance unintentionally enables repression or could be leveraged to encourage political reform. The study examines policy alternatives that strike a balance between security cooperation and governance reforms, ensuring that US engagement does not inadvertently legitimize autocratic rule.*

**Keywords:** Military Aid, Training Program, Counterterrorism, Violent Extremist Organizations, Human Rights, Regional Stability

## 1. Introduction

Uganda has been viewed as a key security partner for the US in East Africa, particularly in counterterrorism operations against al-Shabaab and in regional peacekeeping missions. In return, the Ugandan government has received substantial military aid and counterterrorism assistance from the United States Government.<sup>1</sup> Uganda's strategic role in promoting regional stability justifies the partnership, as evidenced by its military involvement in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and efforts to combat the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).<sup>2</sup> As a result, Uganda has consistently received support from Washington, particularly in the areas of military aid, training programs, and intelligence collaboration. The security partnership has continued despite President Museveni's increasingly authoritarian domestic policies,

including suppression of opposition parties, restriction on press freedom, the passage of controversial anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, and the manipulation of electoral processes.<sup>3</sup> The administration deploys security forces to suppress dissent, limits political liberties, and undermines democratic values and practices in the country. This strategic alliance and domestic authoritarianism raise critical questions in US foreign policy. To what extent does support for strategically essential but repressive regimes serve American interests or undermine them?

This paper examines the implications of the U.S.'s continued military and security support for Uganda amid increasing domestic repression by the Ugandan regime. The article argues that while US policy is grounded in realist imperatives such as counterterrorism

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and regional stability, it conflicts with liberal internationalist principles that advocate for democracy, accountability, and human rights. Drawing on qualitative documentary analysis, case studies, and theoretical frameworks from realism and liberal internationalism, the paper examines how security assistance affects Uganda's internal political dynamics and what this means for the legitimacy and coherence of US foreign policy. The analysis proceeds in six components. First, the paper outlines the theoretical lenses guiding the analysis. Second, it provides historical context on US-Uganda relations, followed by an assessment of Uganda's authoritarian trajectory. Third, the paper investigates the scope and implications of US military aid, evaluating key moments of contradiction or complicity. The paper concludes by offering recommendations for recalibrating US policy to balance strategic interests with a commitment to democratic values.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Realism

This paper employs two international relations theories, realism and liberalism, to analyze the bilateral relations between the United States and Uganda in East Africa. Proponents of realism, such as Carr, Morgenthau, and Waltz, view the theory as one of the most influential theories of global politics, and military and foreign policy officials adhere to its timeless insights.<sup>4</sup> Realism emphasizes the significance of power and self-interest in a country's relationships with others. From a realist perspective, military aid is often viewed as a tool to promote the strategic interests of the donor state. These architects of the theory emphasize the importance of power, particularly military power, in ensuring a state's survival and security.<sup>5</sup> The concept depicts a hostile world of power-seeking countries, explained in terms of human nature.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, others emphasize the anarchical structure of international politics.<sup>7</sup> The US supports its allies and partners to bolster their security and influence in key regions. Realists argue that states primarily focus on survival and on maximizing their relative power to achieve security and global hegemony, and that US security assistance facilitates these objectives.<sup>8</sup>

Realism, as a dominant theory in international relations, emphasizes the pursuit of national interest, the centrality of the state, and the importance of power in an anarchic international system. Realism offers a compelling lens for understanding the strategic motivations underlying US-Uganda bilateral relations and engagement, particularly in the areas of security, counterterrorism, and regional influence. From a realist perspective, U.S. foreign policy toward Uganda is primarily shaped by geopolitical interests rather than by normative concerns, such as human rights and democratization.<sup>9</sup> Uganda's strategic location in East Africa, bordering South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Somalia, makes it a valuable ally in the US efforts to maintain stability in a volatile region. The United States has provided significant military assistance to Uganda, primarily in the form of training and logistical support for the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF), which has contributed troops to US-backed missions, including the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, realism explains the endurance of US-Uganda ties despite concerns over authoritarian governance and human rights violations under President Yoweri Museveni. While liberal frameworks might predict mixed relations due to Uganda's democratic backsliding or repressive policies, such as the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, realism suggests that the US maintains the relationship because it prioritizes counterterrorism cooperation and regional stability. This reflects the realist assumption that states act primarily to preserve their security and strategic interests, even at the expense of promoting liberal values abroad. Additionally, while often framed in developmental terms, US aid to Uganda can be interpreted as an instrument for influence and leverage through a realist lens. Economic and military assistance help ensure Uganda remains within the US sphere of influence, especially in a context where China is expanding its African infrastructure and investment footprint.<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, realism emphasizes how national interests, strategic partnerships, and power dynamics shape US-Uganda relations. Realism posits that US support for Uganda is a calculated strategy to secure American interests, including stability, counterterrorism, and the containment of rival powers. Interestingly, moral and ideological concerns are subordinate to the primary goal of national security. This framework underscores the pragmatic choices made by both states as they navigate a complex regional and global environment where security and influence often take precedence over normative commitments.

### 2.2 Liberalism

Proponents of liberalism, such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant, emphasize cooperation, international institutions, economic interdependence, and the spread of democratic values, positing that nations can cooperate to pursue mutual goals, thereby promoting multilateralism and world peace.<sup>12</sup> Applying liberal theory to US-Uganda relations underscores how diplomacy, development assistance, and institutional partnerships shape the bilateral relationship, fostering cooperation, political liberalization, and global stability.<sup>13</sup>

From a liberal perspective, US engagement with Uganda is rooted in strategic interests and a commitment to promoting long-term peace and stability, which is grounded in the principles of democratic governance, the rule of law, human rights, and economic development. The US government, through agencies like United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the State Department, and multilateral organizations such as the World Bank, has provided substantial development assistance to Uganda in areas such as public health, particularly HIV/AIDS, through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), education, governance reforms, and economic capacity-building. These initiatives reflect liberalism's emphasis on positive-sum cooperation and the belief that internal political and economic conditions influence international behavior.<sup>14</sup>

International institutions and norms also play a critical role in this framework. Uganda's participation in regional and international

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organizations' peacekeeping efforts, such as the African Union and the United Nations, facilitates cooperative security and development goals. The United States supports Uganda's integration into these frameworks to strengthen regional stability, enhance accountability, and align national policies with broader international standards. Uganda's participation in peacekeeping aligns with US support for multilateral security efforts, helping maintain regional stability and order. Since liberalism emphasizes international cooperation, institutions, human rights, and global economic development, the US promotes global stability through rule-based collaboration and growth.<sup>15</sup> Liberalism holds that peace in international affairs can be achieved through cooperation among states.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, liberalism also highlights tensions within the relationship between the US and Uganda. US criticism of Uganda's democratic deficit and backsliding, particularly restrictions on press freedom, political opposition, and LGBT+ rights, reveals the normative dimension of liberal theory, which is based on continued dialogue rather than isolation.<sup>17</sup> Although the US has continued its engagement, it has also imposed targeted sanctions and withheld aid in response to human rights violations, aiming to incentivize policy changes through institutional and diplomatic pressure rather than coercion or force.

In this view, US-Uganda relations are not merely transactional or power-driven but are embedded in a broader liberal order that values rules-based interaction, economic cooperation, and normative progress. From a liberal world perspective, US support for Uganda aims to promote a cooperative international order, foster sustainable development, strengthen institutions, and spread liberal values.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the US believes in engaging with Uganda rather than isolating or relying solely on power politics to achieve its objectives. The bilateral relations between the two countries are aspirational and strategic, aiming to strike a balance between practical collaboration and the long-term goal of fostering a more open, prosperous, and democratic partner state.

US foreign policy should be guided by democratic values, human rights, and the promotion of international norms, with foreign aid serving as a lever to encourage governance reforms in Uganda. Against this backdrop, continued military support to Uganda, despite increasing authoritarianism, is viewed as a contradiction or failure of liberal policy. This suggests a moral hazard, where unconditional aid may embolden President Museveni's regime to intensify repression, restrict civil liberties, and suppress political opponents. US security assistance to Uganda should be contingent upon conditions that link military assistance to political liberalization, fair elections, and respect for civil society and human rights. From this perspective, US support without reform pressure undermines its credibility and global normative leadership.

In conclusion, US-Uganda relations reveal a tension between realist priorities and liberal institutionalist ideals. While realism explains the continuity of support based on Uganda's strategic utility, liberal internationalism critiques this support as a betrayal of democratic principles. This tension epitomizes broader dilemmas in U.S. foreign policy, particularly regarding authoritarian but

strategically important states, such as Uganda.

### 3. Research Methodology

The paper utilizes documentary analysis, a qualitative method for interpreting and contextualizing written records produced by governments and institutions. This technique combines process tracing with documentary evidence to evaluate the causal mechanisms connecting US military assistance, security cooperation, and Uganda's domestic political trajectory. In this study, documentary analysis covered Congressional Research Service (CRS) briefs, US State Department Human Rights Reports, Department of Defense (DOD) reports, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) statements, and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) reports. It also analyzed reports from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Freedom House, as well as statements from the Ugandan government and local media reports. These documents were analyzed thematically to verify factual accuracy and understand the narrative logic and policy framing within official discourse. The study addressed the following research questions: (a) What are the key motivations behind the sustained US military and security support to Uganda? (b) How has US security assistance interacted with patterns of political repression and human rights abuses in Uganda? (c) What are the implications of this relationship for US foreign policy credibility in Africa? (d) Can US military aid be conditioned or restructured to support democratic outcomes in Uganda?

### 4. Documentary Analysis

Uganda, a landlocked nation in East Africa, gained independence from British colonial rule in the 1960s.<sup>19</sup> The post-independence administrations have faced a turbulent political history marked by civil wars, military interventions, and human rights abuses.<sup>20</sup> Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Army (NRA) rose to power through civil war. The regime received significant support from Western donors and international economic institutions, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.<sup>21</sup> These global financial institutions have helped the administration restore relative stability and economic growth after a prolonged period of instability caused by previous administrations. The US supports Museveni's no-party system, which the president claims has eliminated the ethnic and religious divisions created by earlier regimes.<sup>22</sup> Qualitative documentary evidence has demonstrated that US foreign policy toward Uganda centers on promoting democracy, human rights, and regional stability. Military aid and security cooperation were tied to these norms and values.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Western donors and the US acquiesced to Museveni's no-party system when the regime opposed multiparty democracy, an opposition he argued contributed to ethnic and religious divisions during previous administrations. He contended that the movement or no-party system has become a more effective approach to uniting and eliminating the divisions prevalent in past governments. Thus, the movement system has become a post-conflict arrangement that promotes unity and prevents ethnic and religious divisions in Uganda.<sup>24</sup> To restore stability and economic growth in the country, the administration accepted

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the Structural Adjustment Program offered by international financial institutions. Due to its relative stability and economic development, the regime receives significant military, economic, and humanitarian assistance from the US, totaling \$17.4 billion in 2007.<sup>25</sup> The primary objectives of this assistance are to promote regional stability, strengthen democratic institutions, enhance healthcare, security, and economic development, and advance US national interests in the region. Against this background, Uganda has benefited from several US non-military programs, including the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC).<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, US military assistance to Uganda increased after the Cold War due to the political instability caused by domestic extremist groups like the Lord's Resistance Army and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), as well as the bombing of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam by al-Qaeda operatives in Sudan. The US security policy toward Uganda underwent a significant shift following these incidents, mainly due to its strategic geopolitical location between Kenya and Tanzania.<sup>27</sup> Political instability in East Africa became one of the critical reasons for the US intervention in the region when Sudan became a sanctuary for al-Qaeda terrorist groups in the 1990s.<sup>28</sup> The US established a strategic security partnership with Uganda to restore internal and external stability in the region. In addition, the 9/11 attacks boosted the two countries' strategic security partnership and cooperation. The global security environment changed drastically, and the US introduced the global war on terror policy to counter violent extremist organizations emerging in the international system, especially in Africa.<sup>29</sup> Uganda supported the new policy, and its military assistance and security cooperation increased astronomically. US military aid to Uganda includes financial resources, training of the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF), arms sales, and the International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, Uganda has significantly benefited from US counterterrorism operations under the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and from its direct deployment of military forces in regional peacekeeping, particularly through the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).<sup>31</sup> As a result, security cooperation between the two nations has expanded significantly, and Uganda has become a critical security partner to the US, promoting regional stability in the Horn, East Africa, and the Great Lakes Region.<sup>32</sup> The strategic security partnership between the two countries served mutual interests in security cooperation, intelligence sharing, and countering common threats in the area. This increased security assistance and counterterrorism initiatives help the Ugandan security forces defeat domestic insurgent groups and mitigate threats from extremist groups.<sup>33</sup> In addition, expanded security cooperation and the armed forces' support through counterterrorism capabilities, including intelligence gathering, funding, and logistics, have enhanced coordination and regional cooperation between Uganda and its neighboring countries, thereby addressing cross-border threats

posed by extremist groups.<sup>34</sup>

Training foreign security forces has become a key component of U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. The US has funded numerous programs and projects, including educational programs for foreign military officers in the US, joint exercises, and the deployment of US military personnel abroad. The training programs aim to protect U.S. national security interests and professionalize the armed forces, thereby internalizing liberal norms and values, including democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and civilian control of the armed forces.<sup>35</sup> The primary purpose of US counterterrorism operations and training programs in Uganda is to maintain regional stability and mitigate threats posed by extremist organizations. The training of the security forces has helped address transnational threats and challenges affecting the region, including maritime piracy and arms trafficking, thereby promoting regional stability.<sup>36</sup> More importantly, Uganda has played a crucial role in Somalia's stabilization efforts by contributing over 6,000 UPDF troops to AMISOM since its establishment.<sup>37</sup> In 2011, the US spent \$280 million on equipment and training programs, as well as an additional \$18 million on IMET and peacekeeping operations in Uganda. Uganda has been the largest recipient of US security assistance, with almost \$2.5 billion since 2007, due to its strategic role in AMISOM.<sup>38</sup> According to data from the State Department and the Security Assistance Monitor (SAM), the US has trained over 62,000 security forces in Uganda since 2007, with 5,000 trained in 2020.<sup>39</sup> Uganda's involvement in Somalia represents a significant commitment to regional peace and security. Through military engagement, political advocacy, and strategic diplomacy, the country has played a central role in supporting Somalia's journey toward stability. According to Williams (2012), Uganda's intervention in Somalia serves as a strategic tool in international diplomacy, a strategy aimed at enhancing its image among Western donors as a reliable ally in the fight against terrorism. This has helped Uganda secure substantial military and economic assistance, thereby reinforcing its international standing.<sup>40</sup>

#### **4.1 Evidence of Documentary Analysis on the Government's Repression in Uganda**

The results from the documentary analysis show that militarism and coercion have become prominent features of Uganda's political landscape since independence from colonial powers. The administration skillfully employs coercion and clientelism by using security agencies to achieve its political objectives.<sup>41</sup> Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (NRM) rely heavily on institutions to manipulate the political system, ensuring the retention of power and control over Uganda's politics. The regime is marked by a consistent consolidation of power, characterized by systematic repression of political opposition, the erosion of democratic institutions, and the suppression of civil liberties. This authoritarian entrenchment presents significant challenges to Uganda's democratic trajectory.<sup>42</sup> Notably, a new constitution was promulgated in 1995, featuring two five-year terms and a presidential age limit of 35 to 75 years. However, Museveni's autocratic rule began in 2005 when the National Resistance Movement dominated parliament, amended the Constitution, and

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eliminated the presidential term limits and the age limit, allowing the president to contest every future election.<sup>43</sup> The constitutional amendments have drawn criticism as efforts to entrench the president's power and dismantle checks and balances in Ugandan politics.<sup>44</sup>

Another factor contributing to the president's coercive power is the shift from a one-party to a multiparty system, marking a critical turning point toward authoritarianism in Uganda's politics. This pseudo-multiparty democracy, which centers on a single-party movement, has helped the president consolidate his unparalleled political dominance in Uganda's political landscape. The Ugandan People's Defense Force and other state security agencies arrested and detained opposition leaders for questioning the legality of the constitutional amendments. Museveni's administration uses military assistance to perpetuate political repression and defiance, thereby undermining meaningful political reform that would bring real multiparty democracy. The regime relies heavily on the UPDF and other coercive state apparatus for regime survival. [Ibid.]

#### **4.2 Ugandan Government and Security Agencies: Human Rights Abuses**

The results also indicate that the security apparatus, particularly the Ugandan People's Defense Force, has become the cornerstone of the administration. Militarism and coercion have emerged as prominent features of Museveni's administration, alongside constitutional manipulation to enhance the regime's durability and authoritarianism. Security forces have been permitted to engage in partisan politics, and the government has militarized intelligence services and civilian institutions.<sup>46</sup> Uganda's military has evolved into the most powerful political institution due to its readiness to employ violence in support of the ruling government. Security forces in Uganda, especially the UPDF, have been implicated in numerous human rights violations, using the US military assistance against Ugandan citizens. These violations include torture, extrajudicial killings, and arbitrary arrests.<sup>47</sup> Empirical evidence has shown that these agencies have allegedly been involved in electoral manipulation and violent crackdowns on opposition parties. Despite the administration's relative stability and economic growth, human rights abuses have become prevalent. The case of Eric Mwesigwa, who alleged torture by security personnel, highlights ongoing concerns about systemic impunity and the government's failure to address the abuses.<sup>48</sup>

More importantly, allegations of electoral malpractices, including fraud, voter intimidation, and violence, have marred elections in Uganda. Post-election violence is prevalent and has been a significant feature of the 2014, 2016, and 2021 elections.<sup>49</sup> The 2021 general elections saw the arrest of opposition candidate Robert Kyagulanyi, aka Bobi Wine, and the suppression of protests, with security forces using lethal force against civilians. The government of Uganda and state security forces employed intimidation strategies to maintain the regime's survival, as military assistance has legitimized the ruling government's durability and continuity. The failure of the US to pressure Kampala to address human rights abuses, suppression of freedoms, and democratic

deficits for almost four decades disturbs many scholars in the East African sub-region.<sup>50</sup> The country's refusal to renew the United Nations human rights mandate and the enactment of strict legislation against civilian populations are viewed as moves to suppress dissent and limit external scrutiny.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the Ugandan government has intensified its crackdown on civil society organizations and the media. For instance, in 2011, anti-government demonstrations organized by a nonpartisan group called "Activists for Change (A4C)" protested against economic mismanagement, corruption, unemployment, and the high cost of living. Opposition parties, various civil society group members, and protesters were arrested and detained, and the security forces killed some of the demonstrators.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, the repressive authoritarian regime suppresses freedom of assembly and expression through legislation such as the Public Order Management Bill (POMB) and the Non-Governmental Organizations Act. These laws have granted the security apparatus discretionary powers that limit anti-government demonstrations in Uganda.<sup>53</sup> Many human rights organizations have called for the repeal of these laws because they infringe upon the constitutional rights of Ugandan citizens, and they have been used to target members of the opposition party. The government also established the Non-Governmental Organization Act, which has placed restrictions on journalists and civil society organizations focused on human rights. In 2021, the National Bureau for Non-Governmental Organizations, the state regulatory body, halted the activities of fifty-four civil society organizations.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, the government enacted the Computer Misuse Amendment Bill (CMAB) of 2022, which restricts unauthorized access, recording, and information sharing and carries a penalty of up to 10 years in prison. Museveni's Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2014 has negatively impacted the LGBTI community and activists, a fact condemned by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.<sup>55</sup> The government employs security forces and relies on US security assistance, and it fails to be critical of the regime, leading to human rights abuses, suppression of civil society, and repression of the media.

Additionally, the administration's human rights abuses have extended to neighboring countries. For instance, in 2005, the International Court of Justice found the Ugandan government and the UPDF guilty of human rights violations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The 2012 United Nations report also established that the UPDF and the Rwandan government supported the M23 rebel group in the DRC against the ruling government. More importantly, the US State Department Human Rights report of 2022 outlined human rights violations committed by the Ugandan government against its civilian population. Despite the extensive details provided in the report, US security assistance continues to flow to Uganda. The US has failed to critique the administration, which scholars attribute to Uganda's role in regional security cooperation and counterterrorism.<sup>56</sup>

#### **4.3 US Strategic Justification and Security Framing**

Across multiple U.S. documents analyzed, it was revealed

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that military aid to Uganda is consistently framed in terms of counterterrorism cooperation and regional stability. For example, a 2018 AFRICOM briefing describes Uganda as “a critical partner in containing violent extremism in the Horn of Africa.” This language constructs Uganda’s value primarily through its contribution to U.S. strategic interests, particularly in Somalia and South Sudan. The 2020 Department of Defense report on security cooperation in Africa praises Uganda’s logistical capacity and discipline in AMISOM deployments, framing security assistance as a pragmatic investment. Documentary evidence has indicated that US military aid aims to counter the threats of violent extremist organizations, maintain regional stability, and promote democracy and human rights; however, its effects on Uganda’s political landscape are complex. The United States has provided extensive military assistance to Uganda, including training and equipping the UPDF under programs such as the African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA), the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI), and the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program.<sup>57</sup> Uganda has become a key security partner of the US since the end of the Cold War. It plays a critical role in regional stability, especially since al-Qaeda operatives bombed US embassies in East Africa, domestic insurgent groups, and its role in AMISOM. As a result, the country has benefited immensely from counterterrorism operations and security cooperation under TSCTP, which has enhanced the UPDF’s operational readiness and professionalism in internal and external missions.[ Ibid.]

#### **4.4 Human Rights Acknowledged but Depoliticized by the US**

However, military assistance became interchangeable and was utilized to ensure the regime’s survival. This indirectly empowers and emboldens the state’s security forces, particularly the UPDF, to violate the rights of Ugandan citizens through violence, a key aspect of the coercive capacity standard in Museveni’s government. The regime uses U.S. security assistance to suppress political dissent, especially evident in the arrest of Bobi Wine, the leader of the largest opposition party. The security forces have been militarized, demonstrating how U.S. assistance spills over into domestic control to curtail the freedoms of citizens, even though that is not its intended purpose.<sup>59</sup> According to LeBas and Arriola (2020), security assistance in authoritarian regimes often produces unintended consequences, including the consolidation of elite control by strengthening the repressive apparatus, particularly in countries with weak democratic institutions, which is characteristic of the Ugandan government.<sup>60</sup> Despite Uganda’s human rights record, the US persists in military engagement, even though the US State Department Human Rights Reports from 2015 to 2022 consistently document abuses such as arbitrary arrests, torture, restrictions on civil liberties, and violent crackdowns on opposition rallies. However, these concerns are often overlooked in discussions of military aid. One of the most striking observations is the relative silence in military cooperation documents concerning Uganda’s anti-LGBTQ+ laws, despite strong US condemnation in diplomatic press statements. While the State Department publicly criticized Uganda’s 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act, defense-related documents from the same period avoid any mention of the

issue. This reflects the US’s selective enforcement of norms, in which certain rights violations are emphasized when they align with broader US messaging goals but downplayed when they threaten to disrupt strategic alliances.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, US military assistance enhances Uganda’s coercive capacity by improving the UPDF’s capabilities for both external and internal security roles. This has allowed the administration to maintain a robust security sector without prioritizing democratic accountability. While the US frames security assistance in terms of counterterrorism and cooperation, its effects on state power and regime consolidation cannot be ignored. Thus, without stronger conditionality or oversight mechanisms, military aid risks reinforcing authoritarian stability at the expense of political liberalization.<sup>62</sup>

#### **4.5 Insufficient Oversight Mechanisms for Military Assistance**

US military aid has been crucial in shaping the country’s security landscape, regional engagement, and internal political dynamics. Several reports and investigations have revealed that the Ugandan government has misappropriated US military assistance due to insufficient oversight mechanisms, raising concerns about its implications for human rights, regional stability, and democratic governance, the core purposes of the assistance. In 2018, a report by Conflict Armament Research (CAR) revealed that Uganda diverted European-supplied weapons to South Sudan’s military, despite the European Union arms embargo. Notably, a US military jet belonging to Uganda’s air force was deployed in South Sudan, violating US arms export controls.<sup>63</sup> These actions suggest lapses in monitoring and enforcing agreements associated with military aid. While US training programs aim to enhance Uganda’s capacity in peacekeeping and counterterrorism, evidence has indicated that elite units, such as the Special Forces Command (SFC), have been employed to suppress opposition parties and Ugandan citizens, which has helped the regime strengthen its continuous grip on power.<sup>64</sup> The security forces have been involved in human rights violations, raising concerns about the enforcement of human rights standards in US military assistance programs. The government utilizes security assistance to legitimize regime survival, and the US has failed to exert pressure on Kampala to address abuses and implement political reforms that the military aid aims to promote.

Against this backdrop, the U.S. has faced criticism from scholars, journalists, political analysts, and foreign policy experts for its inability to establish effective oversight mechanisms and coordination that foster accountability and transparency, thus keeping both the government and the security apparatus in check. For instance, issues such as inadequate equipment tracking and insufficient personnel vetting have been highlighted. These deficiencies obstruct the effective use of aid and contribute to human rights abuses or regional instability. While U.S. military aid has contributed to enhancing Uganda’s capabilities in regional security operations, there is a critical need to implement robust oversight and accountability mechanisms to ensure that military assistance aligns with human rights standards and does not inadvertently support authoritarian practices, which is essential for preserving the integrity of U.S. foreign policy objectives.

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Nonetheless, security assistance aims to enhance regional security and counterterrorism efforts; the US must address Uganda's ongoing human rights abuses, including political repression, restrictions on civil liberties, and the use of security forces to quell dissent. These actions do not contribute to democratic consolidation but rather lead to democratic backsliding. Oversight mechanisms should be promoted, and the security sector reformed to ensure transparency, reduce corruption, and uphold human rights standards in Uganda. The strengthening of Uganda's security apparatus through military aid also significantly impacts civil society and the political opposition by intimidating or suppressing political opponents and activists, thereby influencing the country's democratic processes. US military assistance and training programs are intended to bolster Uganda's security capabilities, not enable human rights violations, as seen in Museveni's administration. This regime has become the US's strategic security partner and regional stabilizer.

#### 4.6 Ugandan Government Narrative

Ugandan Ministry of Defense publications portray the U.S. as a reliable partner and depict military aid as validation of Uganda's regional leadership. These documents emphasize Uganda's professionalism and reliability in international missions, while presenting domestic unrest as "externally influenced destabilization." The contrast between this internal framing and U.S. rights reports underscores divergent narratives, further complicating accountability mechanisms.

#### 4.7 Strategic and Ethical Dilemmas in US Policy

The contradiction between the US security interests and its stated commitment to promoting democracy in Uganda presents a policy dilemma. Scholars argue that while counterterrorism and regional stability objectives remain priorities, continued support for a repressive government risks undermining US credibility and alienating Ugandan populations.<sup>65</sup> During the post-Cold War era, US foreign policy focused on promoting democracy, human rights, and a free-market economy. Democracy was used as an ideological argument for foreign aid to encourage African countries to adopt multiparty democracy and move away from single-party systems.

In Uganda, Museveni rejected the notion of multiparty democracy, arguing that the political divisions perpetuated by past governments would resurface if multiparty democracy were implemented. As a result, it continued with the National Resistance Movement (NRM), which academic scholars refer to as a "movementocracy" or a non-party system.<sup>66</sup> Uganda's strategic geopolitical position and the activities of violent extremist organizations in the East African region have influenced a shift in US foreign policy toward security, particularly counterterrorism operations, instead of democracy, to maintain regional stability. The norm of democracy has taken a back seat as the US focuses on security partnerships with African countries, regardless of the political systems they adopt. Uganda has become a dependable security partner, which plays a critical role in the global war on terror to counter and defeat domestic insurgent groups and transnational terrorist organizations in the Horn, East, and Central Africa.<sup>67</sup> Uganda has emerged as a regional stabilizer, exemplified by its role in AMISOM, which has

led to the defeat of al-Shabaab and domestic extremist groups.<sup>68</sup> The US security-centric policy has placed the norm of democracy and human rights in the back seat. Its failure to exert both political and diplomatic pressure on Museveni's administration to address the country's democratic deficit undermines its credibility as a beacon of democracy in the global system. This pattern suggests a compartmentalization of values, where democratic norms are acknowledged but rarely integrated into the decision-making process for aid.<sup>69</sup>

#### 4.8 Policy Alternatives and Recommendations

From the results, the paper opines that US security assistance and training programs that emphasize counterterrorism operations in Uganda legitimize Museveni's authoritarian, repressive, and autocratic rule. Consequently, the US must recalibrate its foreign policy toward Uganda to address deficiencies in Yoweri Museveni's government, particularly the democratic deficit. This section of the paper proposes policy alternatives that prioritize human rights and governance reforms while maintaining essential security cooperation. First, for Uganda to implement a meaningful multiparty democracy, the US Government must attach democratic conditionality to its security assistance and training programs. This can be achieved by providing comprehensive oversight mechanisms to ensure accountability and transparency. The US must implement rigorous monitoring systems to guarantee that military aid is used for its intended purposes and is not fungible. Second, the Ugandan security apparatus should be encouraged to promote liberal norms and values and to internalize them, thereby preventing human rights violations. Third, civil society organizations must be supported to act as checks and balances on the government, promoting transparency, accountability, and human rights. Additionally, the US must suspend its military assistance, security cooperation, and training programs in the event of human rights abuses, exerting maximum pressure on Museveni's administration to implement political reforms that can pave the way for genuine multiparty democracy and eliminate the suppression of freedoms. Finally, regular assessments and periodic evaluations of the impact of military aid on Uganda's internal political dynamics should be conducted regularly.

#### 5. Conclusion

The documentary evidence shows that while the US acknowledges Uganda's repressive domestic practices, these are often rhetorically and practically subordinate to strategic interests. Consequently, this results in a foreign policy that tolerates authoritarian consolidation in exchange for military cooperation. This case highlights the ongoing tension in US foreign policy between values and realist imperatives. The selective and compartmentalized nature of documentary framing indicates a policy incoherence that undermines the credibility of human rights promotion efforts.

Additionally, the US-Uganda security partnership exemplifies the broader tensions in US foreign policy between strategic security interests and democratic values. Although Uganda remains a vital security partner in the East African region, the US's continued military assistance and counterterrorism initiatives embolden the

government to suppress political freedoms and prevent Museveni and his National Resistance Movement from adopting genuine political reforms.<sup>70</sup> The United States needs to recalibrate its policy to align security with governance. The consolidation of authoritarian rule in Uganda under President Museveni has involved a combination of legal manipulation, suppression of opposition parties, and human rights violations. These actions have eroded democratic institutions and civil liberties, raising concerns about the country's political future and stability. Nevertheless, US-Uganda security partnerships through counterterrorism foster regional stability; at the same time, military assistance and training programs strengthen the authoritarian regime and undermine democratic institutions. Evidence from the qualitative literature shows that US military aid and counterterrorism operations have significantly contributed to the Ugandan government's and the Ugandan People's Defense Force's coercive and repressive actions, including human rights violations and the failure to establish a proper governance system. Security assistance risks reinforcing authoritarian stability at the expense of political liberalization in the absence of adequate oversight mechanisms. US military aid to Uganda serves strategic interests in regional stability and counterterrorism; it is imperative to balance these objectives with a steadfast commitment to human rights and democratic principles. Relations between the US and Uganda during President Biden's administration became strained due to the enactment of the Anti-Homosexuality Act, democratic backsliding, and the government's deepening ties with revisionist states, particularly China and Russia. According to the Biden administration, Uganda lost its eligibility to participate in the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) due to a regression in undemocratic human rights.<sup>71</sup> More importantly, the US must recalibrate its security-focused foreign policy in Uganda and prioritize good governance throughout the Great Lakes region to ensure lasting regional stability [1-41].

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