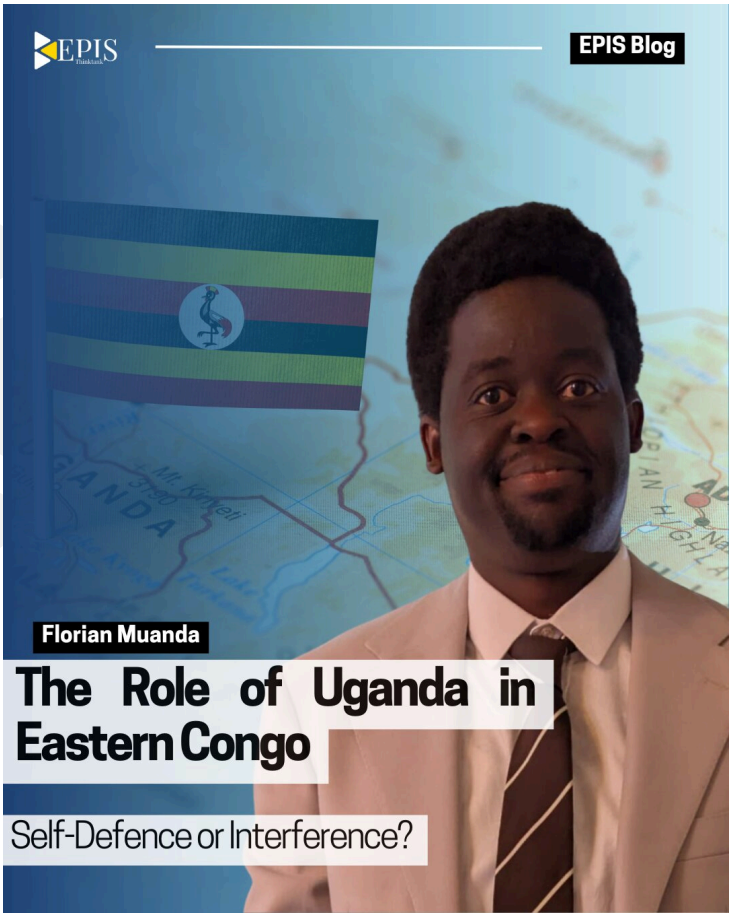
The Role of Uganda in Eastern Congo

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Introduction

The conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has persisted for nearly three decades, involving numerous external actors, including Uganda. Uganda's significant engagement began during this period. Some justify Uganda's involvement as an act of self-defence against the various militias operating in the region, whilst others argue that it is not Uganda's responsibility to restore state authority in Congo. Which perspective is accurate?

Although Rwanda is frequently identified as the primary aggressor in Congo, violating international law and Congolese sovereignty by supporting multiple rebel groups such as the RCD, CNDP, and now M23, Uganda had also been deeply implicated in the destabilization of the region. Motivated by substantial economic, security, and political interests, Uganda has intervened repeatedly. Several United Nations reports have documented Uganda's support for rebel factions and the exploitation of Congo's vast mineral wealth. In response to security threats and rebel attacks, Uganda and Congo have occasionally collaborated in joint military operations. Nevertheless, Uganda's involvement remains controversial, raising persistent concerns regarding issues of sovereignty, economic exploitation, and human rights violations. In this blog, I will examine the historical and current dimensions of Uganda-Congo relations, Uganda's involvement, and local perceptions of Uganda's role.

A Brief History of Congo-Uganda Relations

Understanding the current conflict requires an exploration of the historical, economic, and social factors underpinning Uganda-Congo relations. Sharing a long border, the two nations have intertwined geopolitical interests, economic dependencies, and cultural connections. Historically, their relationship has fluctuated between cooperation and conflict.

Several ethnic groups, including the Lugbara and Baamba, inhabit the border regions, often unaware of or disregarding the colonial boundaries imposed by Belgium (in Congo) and Britain (in Uganda). The partition of these ethnic groups—such as the Alur, Hema, and Lendu—has fostered enduring cross-border identities and loyalties, complicating notions of national belonging. This has contributed to ongoing tensions in the region. Economic interactions between the two territories predate colonialism, revolving around the trade of salt, iron, tools, livestock, and ivory. These exchanges, facilitated by canoes and human porters across Lake Albert, were as much social and political as they were economic, with barter being very common.

Uganda's past involvement in Congo

During Mobutu Sese Seko's regime, Uganda-Congo relations were relatively stable, as Mobutu maintained cooperative ties with Ugandan leaders such as Idi Amin Dada and Milton Obote. However, after Yoweri Museveni overthrew Obote, relations began to shift. Laurent-Désiré Kabila, seeking to overthrow Mobutu amidst the collapse of the Zairian state, allied with Uganda and Rwanda, forming the AFDL (Allied Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo).

In September 1996, this alliance was formalised in Gisenyi, Rwanda, leading to the invasion of Congo starting from Kivu to Kinshasa. Mobutu fled in May 1997, and Laurent-Désiré Kabila assumed the presidency

of the newly named Democratic Republic of Congo. Initially, Ugandan and Rwandan officials wielded significant influence within the Congolese government and military. However, resentment among Congolese citizens grew, fuelled by accusations of abuses and demands for the withdrawal of foreign troops. As tensions escalated, Kabila severed ties with his former allies. Uganda subsequently supported Jean-Pierre Bemba, founder of the MLC (Movement for the Liberation of Congo), while Rwanda backed leaders of the RCD (Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie).

By August 1998, the Second Congo War erupted, involving more than ten African nations. The country was divided into three zones: the MLC-controlled north, the RCD-held east, and the west and centre under Kabila's control. The conflict resulted in millions of deaths and mass displacement. In 2000, Ugandan and Rwandan forces clashed in Kisangani over diamond resources, causing extensive civilian casualties and destruction. Following the assassination of Laurent Kabila in January 2001, his son Joseph Kabila assumed the presidency and initiated peace negotiations. By June 2003, an unprecedented political arrangement saw one president and four vice-presidents sharing power, representing major warring factions.

Uganda's current involvement in Congo

Presently, it is quite difficult to know exactly if Uganda is in Congo for self-defence or interference, because it seems that the Congolese government still collaborates with it. Military operations are deployed to repel militias such as CODECO, ADF/NALU, among others, causing security concerns in the region. In November 2021, the military operation Shujaa was launched, and the Ugandan and Congolese armies have operated ever since in the Ituri and North Kivu provinces to fight the rebels and protect local populations. Also, in the early 2000s, multiple Ugandan officers were involved in looting and smuggling gold reserves from the DRC to Uganda and then overseas. According to the UN report dated 6. June 2019 Ugandans, Rwandans, and Congolese officials are involved in smuggling gold and raw materials from the DRC. So, is the insecurity just an excuse to be present in the DR Congo, or is it self-defence? The Congolese populations are the main victims of these rebel groups, and they are still being killed in the regions. Despite the multiple military cooperations, the rebel groups still pose a threat to the security in the Great Lakes region.

On several occasions, the Ugandan chief of the army, the president Yoweri Museveni's son, has threatened to capture Congolese cities, openly showing his admiration and support for the M23, which invaded Congo and entered via Bunagana, which is at the border of Uganda. He has also on multiple occasions shown disrespect to the authorities, especially the Congolese governor of the Ituri province, Johnny Luboya Nkashama. Quite ironic, when Johnny Luboya was the chief of military intelligence of RCD during the Second War of Congo.

In 2021, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi agreed on road construction to improve commercial trade between the two countries. Three roads were selected for the project: Beni-Kasidi (80 km), Beni-Butembo (54 km), and Bunagana – Goma (89 km). As mentioned earlier, commercial trade between the two countries started way before the colonization, and this project not only brought hope to the local populations, as it would help Ugandan goods to be transported into the Congolese market and vice versa, but it also brought scepticism from Congolese and Ugandans. From the Congolese, the scepticism is observed mostly because of their past trauma with Ugandan involvement in different conflicts in the region. They wonder why a foreign country with several issues, such as potable water access below 20% and poverty rate at 30% would invest almost $250 million to build roads in another sovereign country? And on the Ugandans' side, many voices raised concerns about the decision to build roads in Congo instead of building roads in Uganda.

Local perceptions of Uganda's presence

Among Congolese populations, the presence of foreign troops generates significant resentment. Local communities view these forces as overstaying their mandates and undermining Congolese sovereignty. Many feel infantilised by the implication that their nation cannot manage its own security. There is also widespread suspicion that Uganda's true motives lie in the exploitation of Congo's mineral wealth—diamonds, gold, and coltan—rather than in providing security. Although joint operations continue, rebel groups remain active, and violence persists, reinforcing local perceptions that foreign interventions primarily serve external interests. Furthermore, within the Congolese army, tensions simmer over the perceived patronising attitude of Ugandan forces, although open dissent is muted due to the current regime's support for the cooperation.

Conclusion

Congo's fragility and systemic corruption have rendered it vulnerable to external exploitation. In areas where state authority is absent, militias have filled the vacuum, often subjecting local populations to violence and extortion. Uganda's actions reflect a broader truth in international relations: there are no permanent friendships, only permanent interests. To assert control over its own destiny, Congo must strengthen its military, re-establish state authority across its territory, promote reconciliation among ethnic groups, and pursue lasting peace.