Managing donor perceptions and securing agency: the UPDF intervention in Somalia since 2007

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Abstract

This paper will explore the background to Uganda’s current involvement in Somalia as part of AMISOM and will argue that the UPDF’s presence in Mogadishu has as much to do with Ugandan-donor relations as it does with maintaining regional stability (Kampala’s putative reason for intervention).

The Ugandan engagement in Somalia, it will be argued, is the most recent example of the Museveni regime’s multi-pronged ‘image management’ strategy to secure agency in its relations with donors. The regime has, it will be suggested, undertaken numerous activities in the foreign and domestic spheres to ensure that donors perceive it in a particular way vis a vis their interests: including mediator, guarantor of stability in a volatile region or ally in the War on Terror. In so doing, it has been able to largely avoid scrutiny in areas of traditional donor concern such as democratisation, corruption and military activity, thereby achieving a considerable degree of agency in a theoretically highly unequal relationship.

Introduction

Since February 2007 over 5,000 Ugandan soldiers have been sent to Somalia as part of the African Union Mission in that country (AMISOM) and Uganda remains both the largest contributor of troops and the major African coordinator of the operation. The Museveni government has explained the Ugandan intervention in terms of regional responsibility, African solidarity and domestic interests. Thus Defence Minister Crispus Kiyonga, during the parliamentary debate where deployment was proposed, stressed that ‘African problems have African solutions’ and that Uganda had an obligation to intervene not only to sever the link between ‘unstable Somalia and...small arms proliferation in Karamoja [a region of Uganda]’ but

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also to restore stability to a ‘sister African state...for the good of the region...’ (Parliament of Uganda (Hansard) 13/02/07).

International considerations, however, must also be taken into account. Not only have Uganda’s major aid donors, particularly the US, UK and EU, been the primary funders of AMISOM, both directly and through the UN and African Union (AU), they have also provided the Ugandan defence ministry and army (the Ugandan People’s Defence Force (UPDF)) with substantial amounts of logistical support, training and resources to assist them in the mission. Indeed, Ugandan involvement itself came about only after US and UK officials approached Museveni between 2005-2006 suggesting such a thing and Kampala’s central role in the operation has been consistently facilitated since this time by these donor governments.

In what terms, therefore, should Ugandan involvement in Somalia be understood? This paper will argue that it is vital to appreciate the interaction between donor support, international perceptions and African agency in answering this question. Uganda’s intervention will therefore be explored in two contexts. Firstly, in a historical context: AMISOM is only the most recent example of Uganda’s extensive involvement in regional conflict resolution and peacekeeping initiatives and thus should be understood as part of a wider pattern of foreign policy behaviour. Secondly, in the context of Uganda’s continued engagement with the international system. Western donors have long-supported the Museveni regime, providing between 30-70% of Uganda’s national budget since the early-1990s, in spite of its increasingly poor reputation in areas such as democratisation, governance and human rights. This, often uncritical, support has been explained by many commentators as a consequence of donors viewing the regime as a valuable ‘guarantor of regional stability’ and, since 9/11, as an ‘ally in the War on Terror’.
Kampala’s involvement in Somalia has, therefore, served as a useful means to bolster and perpetuate the credibility of these durable narratives and thereby retain donor support.

Indeed, this paper contends that Ugandan intervention has, to a considerable degree, been motivated by a desire, on the Museveni regime’s part, to contribute to these narratives, or ‘images’, as part of a longstanding ‘image management’ exercise vis a vis its donors. By combining actions such as the sending of troops to Somalia with the skilful engagement of Western media organisations and donor officials and the use of public relations firms, the regime has been able to convince its development partners to see it primarily as a useful regional ally worthy of support rather than as a corrupt, semi-authoritarian ‘success story gone wrong’ worthy of censure. In doing so, it will be argued, the regime has secured a substantial degree of agency in what is otherwise a highly unequal relationship with the international system.

**Intervention in Somalia**

*Background*

It is first necessary, however, to outline the background to Uganda’s involvement in AMISOM. Plans to send Ugandan peacekeepers to war-torn Somalia can be traced back to at least early 2005 when the AU Peace and Security Council and IGAD, East Africa’s regional development organisation, cited Uganda as a potential major contributor to a new peacekeeping mission known as IGASOM. Aimed at shoring-up the recently-formed Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG), IGASOM was to involve the deployment of up to 10,000 troops from Uganda and Sudan and while Ugandan officials discussed the possibility of deploying one or two battalions with UK Foreign Office personnel in April 2005 the mission nevertheless foundered after funding shortfalls and logistical complications (East African 06/06/05; FOI 2009a).
By mid-2006, however, the TFG’s tenuous hold on power was further weakened after a group of Islamic courts (the Council of Somali Islamic Courts) gained control of Mogadishu and begun to steadily capture the rest of South-Central Somalia (Marchal 2007). Despite the relative stability that the Courts brought to the country, their victory was not welcomed by Western powers, who linked the group to international terrorism, or by Ethiopia, whose regional dominance was likely to be threatened by a resurgent Somali state (BBC News 28/12/06). Only a few months, therefore, after the AU attempted to revive IGASOM, again securing Uganda’s assurance that UPDF troops would be deployed, Ethiopia, with US support, invaded Somalia to prop-up the TFG and drive out the Courts. The ensuing conflict lead to the abandonment of IGASOM.

After the Islamic Courts’ defeat, in January 2007, Uganda, along with a number of other African governments, nevertheless pledged its support for a new UN-backed AU peacekeeping initiative, AMISOM, whose purpose was to protect the TFG and its institutions and undertake peace support operations in an effort to restore stability to the country. Uganda became the first among these states to deploy troops to Mogadishu in February 2007. Though joined by a Burundian deployment later that year, Uganda has remained the major African contributor to AMISOM and main coordinator of its activities in Somalia and has deployed over 5,000 troops to the country since 2007. AMISOM is a regional initiative but has been facilitated and supported strongly by the US and EU diplomatically, financially and through the provision of weaponry, military training and technical support. By early 2010, for example, donors had pledged over US$200 million in funding for the mission and promised to ‘reimburse’ Uganda for money spent on troops and equipment, with the EU alone providing nearly US$8 million to Kampala in reimbursements between 2007-2010 (East African 24/01/10). In addition, the UK has funded
over 30 training courses for Ugandan troops since their deployment, instructing them in ‘peace support operations’, ‘armed tactics’, ‘logistics’, ‘urban operations’ and ‘bomb disposal’ (FOI 2009b). It is also clear from interviews with US officials that Washington is in frequent contact with Kampala regarding tactics and intelligence in relation to the mission.2

The intervention in the context of regime foreign policy behaviour

As noted, Kampala has frequently justified its involvement in Somalia with reference to African solidarity and the responsibilities of African states to help resolve African conflicts. In a March 2011 interview, for example, Ugandan Foreign Minister Sam Kutesa made clear that:

We are in Somalia because of our Pan-African policy, we believe that it is not right for Africans to sit and watch as an African state becomes a failed state...We think African states have to play the role to bring stability to the continent. (Daily Monitor 23/03/11)

The expression of such sentiments by the Museveni regime has certainly not been confined to public discourse on the AMISOM operation alone and, indeed its intervention in Somalia has simply been one of the more recent examples of Uganda attempting to involve itself in regional peacekeeping initiatives. As long ago as 1994, for example, the regime sent nearly 800 troops to join the ECOMOG peacekeeping force in Liberia and remained committed militarily long after many other African forces had abandoned the mission (UN 1995:18; Adibe 1997: 478). During this deployment, the UPDF was praised by many commentators for its ‘exemplary behaviour and discipline’ and for being one of only two states outside of Liberia’s immediate neighbourhood

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2 Anonymous interview, Washington DC, November 2009
willing to support the mission with troops (de Torrente 2001: 116). For a country such as Uganda which, in 1994, was still recovering from decades of war and civil strife to involve itself in an exercise of such logistical complexity and strategic insignificance (from a Ugandan perspective) would no doubt have sent a strong message to regional and international actors regarding Kampala’s perception of its regional obligations. This is particularly because Museveni himself had pushed hard at the OAU for the sending of a military force to help resolve the conflict (Adibe 1997: 473).

Moreover, Uganda has consistently played a leading role in regional peace negotiations and initiatives, even when the instability such initiatives have been designed to address has been caused, to a considerable degree, by Kampala’s own belligerent foreign policy. In the mid-2000s, for example, Uganda was a major player in the discussions leading to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement which ended the twenty-year Sudanese civil war. Similarly, in the later 2000s, it was heavily-involved in the Tripartite Plus Joint Commission, an inter-governmental panel comprising of delegations from Congo, Rwanda and Uganda whose main purpose was to ‘achieve lasting peace and security in the Great Lakes region’ through restoring diplomatic relations between Kinshasa, Kigali and Kampala, strengthening regional security mechanisms and eliminating ‘negative forces’, ie. rebel groups, who posed a threat to ‘regional peace’ (US Department of State 2007). This is in spite of the fact that Museveni’s own brother, Salim Saleh, was originally included by Congo on a list of such ‘forces’ in the earlier stages of the Commission’s life (New Vision 15/03/07).

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3 The other being Tanzania
Uganda has also attempted to present itself as one of the foremost authorities on resolving political crises in the African continent. During the 2000s, for example, Museveni chaired the Regional Initiative on resolving Burundi’s civil war and though both South Africa and Tanzania have more often been cited by commentators as responsible for the success of this process, the Burundian leader has also expressed thanks to Uganda for the role it has played (New Vision 28/05/09). Less edifying have been the failed attempts by Kampala to provide ‘Ugandan solutions to African problems’ in response to the 2008 electoral violence in Kenya and the ongoing 2011 crisis in Libya.

In the former case, Museveni’s efforts to find ‘an amicable and immediate solution’ to the Kenyan political crisis were thwarted by mistrust engendered between himself and presidential candidate Raila Odinga as well as the corresponding success of a rival African mediation process set-up by Kofi Annan (Khadiagala:437-438). After being criticised for continuing with an ‘inefficient’ parallel process which was clearly not succeeding, Uganda withdrew nevertheless emphasising the ‘major breakthrough’ its contribution had achieved in the talks (BBC News 24/01/08). Furthermore, as regime violence against civilians escalated in response to uprisings in Libya in spring 2011, Museveni proposed the creation of an AU High-Level Ad-hoc Committee on Libya to deal with the problem. The Committee would represent, in Museveni’s words, an ‘AU solution to an African problem’ and would involve a delegation of Ugandan and other African ministers flying to Tripoli to meet with Colonel Gadaffi and the protestors in an effort to resolve the crisis. Since the March 2011 imposition of a UN-backed no-fly zone over Libya, however, the Committee’s work has been put on hold and Ugandan requests for Committee members to travel to Tripoli have been refused by the UN Security Council (Daily Monitor 21/03/11).
Uganda’s participation in AMISOM, therefore, needs to be seen as the continuation of a well-established Ugandan policy of involving itself in regional conflict resolution efforts. This policy has become one of the characteristic features of the country’s engagement with the rest of Africa and is a consequence of several domestic and regional factors. Firstly, the Ugandan regime’s belief in pan-Africanism should not be understated and genuine nature of this belief is attested to in numerous NRM documents, some of which predate Museveni’s seizure of power in 1986.

Secondly, a desire to be acknowledged as a regional leader by other African states has also played a role in the development of this policy. Museveni has high ambitions for Uganda and believes that he should be seen by his African colleagues as as much of a regional statesman as Mandela, Nyrere or Annan. Involvement in regional peacekeeping, therefore, has been a means for him to achieve this status. Thirdly, while the Ugandan regime’s main support base has always been the UPDF and, indeed, most senior members of the government, including the President, are current or former members of this institution, maintaining its loyalty has become increasingly dependent upon the regime providing patronage resources to troops or, at least, opportunities for soldiers to augment their salaries. Interventions in Liberia and Somalia, therefore, have been a useful means for the regime to keep a potentially volatile domestic constituency both occupied and financially satisfied. UPDF soldiers serving in AMISOM, for example, earn a great deal more than their counterparts who remain in Uganda, courtesy of AMISOM’s Western funders (Parliament of Uganda (Hansard) 08/02/07). In addition, it is perhaps no coincidence that Ugandan enthusiasm for joining the mission came only a few years after the most recent UPDF regional enrichment exercise – the 1998-2003 involvement in Congo – had come to an end.
Finally, Ugandan national security has often been threatened by regional instability (in Congo or Sudan) or terrorism (in Somalia). Though Kampala’s foreign policy has sometimes aggravated the dangers posed to it by foreign rebels and terrorists they nevertheless remain genuine threats as the July 2009 bombings in Kampala demonstrated. Arguably, therefore, the regime has engaged with these peace processes so frequently as a means to promote its own national interests and better guarantee the security of its citizens.

The intervention in the context of donor-Ugandan relations

It is important to acknowledge, nonetheless, that Uganda’s regional activities, including in Somalia, have also been influenced by non-African actors, particularly donor governments. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the Museveni regime’s involvement in regional conflict resolution is how often its actions have been aligned with Western preferences for maintaining ‘stability’ in Africa. Often, in fact, Ugandan activities to this end have been made possible only with the direct assistance of officials in donor capitals. The Tripartite Plus Joint Commission, for example, was set-up, funded and facilitated by Washington as a means to promote stability in one of the more unstable regions of central Africa (Sunday Vision 17/03/07). Similarly, though organised through IGAD, the negotiations which lead to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 were sponsored by the US, UK, Norway, Italy and other donor governments whose representatives invested heavily in the dialogue and remained solidly engaged for its entire duration. A former Ugandan minister has even suggested that the
US became ‘heavily reliant’ on Kampala during the talks both to secure the outcome it favoured and ‘to prevent the Russian and Chinese governments from playing a larger role’ in the process.4

Moreover, the regime’s foreign policy in general has often supported regional or international donor agendas in relation to opposing terrorism. Unlike many other Western allies this approach appears to have pre-dated the declaration by Washington of a ‘Global War on Terror’ in 2001. During the 1990s, for example, Uganda’s attitude to Sudan became steadily more hostile as Washington’s own relationship with Khartoum degenerated over claims that the Bashir regime had been complicit in a number of terrorist attacks against US citizens. Between 1989-1995, Ugandan-Sudanese relations were tense but never openly aggressive, even though both sides suspected the other of funding domestic rebels groups across their borders. Thus when asked in the early 1990s about Sudanese support for the LRA, a Ugandan rebel group, Museveni said diplomatically: ‘the problem on our northern border is sometimes presented as one between Uganda and Sudan. Our view is that this is primarily a Sudanese problem that started before independence’ (Wafula Bichachi 2004: 79-80).

By 1996, however, when the US designated Sudan a ‘state sponsor of terrorism’ and suspended its embassy operations in Khartoum, Uganda had already expelled all Sudanese officials from Kampala, raided their embassy, closed numerous Ugandan Islamic NGOs with connections to Sudan, severed relations with Khartoum, claiming it ‘supported terrorists’ in Uganda and had begun to refer to the Bashir regime as Uganda’s ‘only enemy on the continent’ (Crusader 24/12/96). Furthermore, between 1995-1998, Uganda enthusiastically took part in a number of US-funded summits and military initiatives (such as the 1995 Frontline States Strategy) aimed at

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putting pressure on Sudan and is even alleged to have served as a conduit for the supply of US arms and ammunition to the Sudanese rebel group the SPLA (Times 17/11/99; Boston Globe 08/12/99). Interestingly, when the US and other donors took a less confrontational approach to Khartoum in the early 2000s, hoping to encourage the Bashir government to work with them to restore peace to the country, Kampala too adopted a more conciliatory tone, restoring relations with Sudan in 2002.

Since 9/11, Uganda has continued to align its own foreign policy with the anti-terror priorities of its Western donors. Thus in 2003 it became one of only five African states to give its full support to the US-led War on Iraq with Ugandan Foreign Minister James Waphakabulo asserting that ‘the potential link between terrorism and weapons of mass destruction poses a very serious threat to international peace and security’ and that Uganda would be ‘ready to assist in any way possible’ during the operation (IOL News 23/03/03). Similarly, since 2006, Kampala has worked closely alongside the US and other donors in putting pressure on Eritrea over its alleged support for Islamic terrorism. In 2007, for example, when the Bush administration considered designating Asmara a ‘state sponsor of terrorism’ (Associated Press 17/08/07), Museveni reportedly visited Isaias Afwerki, the Eritrean leader, in Massawa and delivered a ‘tough message’ from Washington regarding his behaviour, following which he gave a full briefing to the State Department and White House.⁵ Likewise, in 2009, the US and Ugandan delegations to the UN worked together closely on passing resolution 1907 which sought to impose economic sanctions on Eritrea for assisting Somali terrorist groups. According to a junior Ugandan foreign minister, Kampala had also convinced its IGAD allies of the importance of this move earlier in the year (New Vision 28/12/09).

⁵ Interview with US official, November 2009 (Washington DC, USA)
In the case of Somalia, Uganda’s involvement in AMISOM appears to have been valued by donors as part of both of these agendas: securing regional stability and tackling terrorist threats. Though the chaos in Somalia, and the likelihood that a sustained lack of government in the country could provide a ‘safe haven’ for terrorists, was of concern to donors throughout the 2000s, it is clear that it was not until 2006 and the rise of the Islamic Courts that it became a significant worry for most. The Islamic Courts were seen by some donors, particularly the US, as ‘jihadists’ and, following their routing by the Ethiopian army in December, Washington’s worst fears were realised when various extremist offshoots of the Courts, notably al-Shabaab, emerged in opposition to both the Ethiopian occupiers and the TFG. According to a former White House official, memos on Somalia began to appear on President Bush’s desk ‘on a daily basis’ from the latter part of 2006 and this reveals the extent to which the subject had become a major issue for Western donors; outside of crises, the US president simply does not spend his time dealing with African issues (Schraeder 1991:385).  

Indeed, this concern appears to have resulted in donors reaching out to Uganda and asking the Museveni regime to intervene as part of an international peacekeeping mission. In December 2006, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice lobbied Ugandan Foreign Minister Sam Kutesa to make him aware of the apparent links between the Courts and al-Qaeda while George W Bush himself telephoned Museveni, urging him to play a central role in a peacekeeping intervention aimed at shoring-up the TFG (Daily Monitor 28/12/06). While this version of events has been dismissed by senior US and Ugandan officials, mid-level US and UK personnel have acknowledged that Uganda was actively ‘targeted’ and ‘leaned on’ by Washington and London and ‘encouraged’ to supply troops for this mission. Indeed, an official at the Ugandan Defence

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6 Interview with US official, November 2009 (Washington DC, USA)
Ministry has even admitted that his government’s line that involvement in AMISOM ‘has nothing to with our relationship with the United States’ is ‘not very convincing’.\(^7\) Certainly the fact that donors have played such a significant role in facilitating and financing Uganda’s role in AMISOM demonstrates that they have been strongly supportive of Ugandan involvement. Though US officials have denied the idea of a ‘quid pro quo’ it is interesting to also note that Kampala received a substantial ‘funding package’ from Washington after joining the operation.\(^8\) Similarly, the fact that, since 2007, France (which has previously shown limited interest in building stronger links with the Museveni government) has also begun to pay for the training of UPDF soldiers heading to Somalia again shows the degree to which Ugandan and donor agendas vis a vis AMISOM coincide.\(^9\)

**Managing donor perceptions**

The fact that Uganda’s regional behaviour seemingly largely conforms with what donors ‘want’ from an African ally, both in terms of securing stability and opposing terrorism, should not be seen, however, as a pure coincidence. As noted, the UPDF has benefited considerably from the provision of arms, training and military assistance resulting from its involvement in donor-sponsored regional initiatives. This, in turn, has been useful to the Museveni government for regime maintenance purposes as it has increasingly used these well-funded and organised security forces to quell domestic opposition, particularly during elections.

More broadly, though, the regime has come to rely on general donor support, particularly development aid, as a means to stay in power. During the 1990s, for example, donor aid financed

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\(^7\) Interview with UK official, October 2009 (London, UK); Interview with US official, November 2009 (Washington DC, USA); Interview with donor official, February 2010 (Kampala, Uganda)  
\(^8\) ibid  
\(^9\) Interview with Western donor official, May 2009 (Kampala, Uganda)
over half of the Kampala government’s central budget and though this figure has declined over the years, Uganda remains a significantly aid-dependent country with aid representing an equivalent of 13% of its GDP in 2008 compared to 4% in neighbouring Kenya (OECD 2009). Moreover, donor support for Uganda in general and the Museveni regime specifically has been sustained, enthusiastic and linked much less to political conditionalities than elsewhere in Africa. Thus while aid has frequently been suspended to Kenya, Malawi, Zambia and others since 1989 over political transgressions or corruption scandals, Uganda has often escaped similar treatment in spite of being equally, if not more, guilty of such conduct. As of 2011, Uganda remains one of the top ten beneficiaries of US, Swedish and Norwegian aid, the second largest recipient of Danish aid and the leading recipient of Irish aid (OECD 2009). Similarly, while countries like Democratic Republic of Congo, Burkina Faso, Zambia, Burundi, Cameroon and Niger have all lost out on funding in recent aid reviews in France, the UK, Sweden, Canada and the Netherlands, Uganda has consistently been retained as a priority aid partner. Indeed, DFID’s March 2011 review announced that UK aid to Uganda would rise by 16% between 2011-2013 (DFID 2011).

Continued donor support for aid-dependent Uganda is particularly relevant to discussions on Ugandan intervention in Somalia since the Museveni regime’s notional role as a guarantor of regional stability and enemy of Islamic terrorism has frequently been cited by both commentators and donors as a major rationale for lasting international assistance. Thus scholars such as Haynes, Hauser and Muhumuza have noted the proliferation of central African ‘civil wars’ and ‘political strife’ since the 1980s and point out that Uganda has been seen, by contrast, as an ‘oasis of relative stability’ and an ‘interlocutor’ for donors in regional conflict resolution processes thereby resulting in increased donor support (Hauser 1999: 633-634; Haynes 2001:
Likewise, Pinkney and Tangri and Mwenda suggest that Kampala’s cooperation in the War on Terror has encouraged donors to continue supporting the regime and to ‘dampen criticism’ which they would otherwise make of domestic democratic backslidings for fear of undermining Uganda’s ‘strategic role’ in the fight against terrorism (Pinkney 2005: 126; Tangri and Mwenda 2008: 191).

Donors themselves have also often referred to these ‘images’ of the Ugandan government when justifying the level of donor assistance they provide. In 2002, for example, a number of European development ministers (including the UK’s Clare Short) praised Uganda for ‘striving to bring peace to the [East African] region’ while a former Clinton administration official noted in 2009 how valuable Museveni has been to the international community as a ‘leader of regional initiatives’ (New Vision 14/02/02). Likewise, in 2011, the outgoing EU Ambassador to Uganda made clear in an interview that ‘I would like to applaud President Museveni for his and his government’s engagement in ensuring the stability of this troubled region of Africa’. Citing Uganda’s role in Burundi, Rwanda, Congo, Sudan and Somalia, he went on to declare that ‘President Museveni has a vision and supports the efforts of the international community towards restoring peace and stability’ (Sunday Monitor 09/01/11). Similarly, a 2005 USAID report noted that ‘US interests in Uganda are twofold. Uganda is a critical player in the region in leading efforts to address regional conflicts peacefully’ (USAID 2005). In 2008, President Bush himself characterised his Ugandan counterpart as a ‘strong leader...in solving regional conflicts’ (New Vision 24/09/08), while a UK official acknowledged in 2009 that donors have been ‘more tolerant of Uganda because of counter-terrorism in the Horn [of Africa]’. US officials have lauded Museveni for ‘stepping-up’ in the War on Terror and ‘doing some heavy-lifting for us’ in

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10 Interview with US official, November 2009 (Washington DC, USA)
11 Interview with UK official, March 2009 (London, UK)
battling regional extremism. They have also admitted in private that Uganda’s involvement in AMISOM specifically has made them far less inclined to criticise the Museveni government, with one senior official noting that they have been reluctant to ‘bite the hand that feeds’.

It is clear, then, that Ugandan intervention in Somalia has served to bolster donor views of Kampala as a ‘guarantor of regional stability’ and ‘an ally in the War on Terror’ and this has lead both to continued donor support for, and minimal international criticisms of, the Museveni government. For those interested in African agency, however, the most important question arising from this turn of events is: to what extent has Ugandan involvement in AMISOM been consciously designed to ‘buy into’ and reinforce these images in donor minds? In other words, has Kampala simply been responding to donor pleas for assistance as a means to satisfy its patrons or has this been part of a more sophisticated and long-term approach to participating in the international system?

An analysis of Uganda’s diplomatic engagement with donors since the mid-1990s would strongly suggest the latter. During annual visits to Washington and London, Museveni and his key advisers have been extremely savvy in soliciting interviews with major Western media organisations and speaking engagements at respected universities and think tanks including the Woodrow Wilson Center, Royal African Society and Council on Foreign Relation. The regime has also retained a number of well-connected and very active public relations or lobbying firms in both capitals, spending well over US$1 million annually on these contracts by the mid-2000s, to represent its interests (Fisher 2011). The purpose of these activities appears to have been, to a large extent, to promote these two narratives on Uganda as a means to influence donors

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12 Interview with UK official, October 2009 (London, UK); Interview with US official, February 2010 (by telephone)
13 Interview with US officials, November 2009 (Washington DC, USA)
(guarantor of stability and ally against terrorism) and downplay or neutralise other narratives which might undermine them.

Thus Museveni used speeches at the Woodrow Wilson Center and Council on Foreign Relations in 2002 and 2005 respectively to emphasise his government’s leadership in regional peacekeeping, particularly in Burundi, noting that Kampala’s assistance had ‘led to successful transition [in Bujumbura] and deployment of the first AU peacekeeping mission’ to the nation (Woodrow Wilson Center 2002; Council on Foreign Relations 2005). Similarly, in 2009, Ugandan Foreign Minister Sam Kutesa told Foreign Policy that Uganda’s leadership in regional conflict resolution had ‘without a doubt’ enabled Kampala to create a leading ‘model’ for resolving regional disagreements peacefully (Foreign Policy 10/08/09)). Likewise, in a 2003 Council on Foreign Relations speech, advertised as ‘Freedom from Fear: Forging US-Africa Partnerships against Terror’, Museveni assured his audience, which included a number of policy-makers and diplomats, that ‘Uganda is also a member of the “Coalition of the Willing”’ and outlined how Kampala’s domestic and regional policies, in Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi and Congo, had lead to the establishment of ‘peace and security’ and the ‘pre-emption’ of al-Qaeda attacks on donor personnel (Council on Foreign Relations 2003). Furthermore, in a 2008 speech to US Army and Pentagon officials in Kansas, he reiterated Uganda’s ‘support for the War’ and announced his enthusiasm for organising a ‘US-AU summit’ on counter-terrorism (Museveni 2008). The regime has also made frequent use of references to its own domestic ‘terrorists’ (principally the LRA) and past instability caused by the dictatorships of Milton Obote and Idi Amin in order to emphasise to Western officials that Uganda is genuinely in the ‘frontline of the War on Terror’ and has, under the NRM, enjoyed comparatively better domestic stability than under previous governments (Fisher 2011).
The regime has also used Western lobbyists to promote these narratives in dialogue with donor officials and legislators. Thus in an April 2003 letter to Walter Kansteiner, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Rosa Whitaker, CEO of the Whitaker Group – a US lobbyist retained by Uganda between 2003-2009, stressed that ‘Uganda is cooperating with US intelligence officials in the Horn of Africa, and...is providing strong support to the United States in regional and international fora in the war against terrorism...[including]...supporting President Bush’s Operation Iraqi Freedom’ (Whitaker Group 2003). Similarly, in an April 2004 letter from Whitaker to Andrew Natsios, Administrator of USAID, Uganda was described as ‘one of America’s most reliable and steadfast partners in Africa’ and was introduced as a country well-known for ‘strongly supporting the US in the global war against terrorism’ (Whitaker Group 2004). Indeed, between 2005-2007, Kampala retained another lobbying firm, Scribe Strategies, specifically to ensure ‘Uganda’s interest under the East Africa Counter Terrorism Initiative and Uganda’s role in the War on Terrorism’ (Scribe Strategies 2005).

Arguably, then, intervention in Somalia has been a continuation of this strategy of Ugandan ‘image management’. Uganda’s international ‘image’ was significantly damaged between 2005-2006 after Museveni changed his country’s constitution in order to run for a third term and arrested his main opponent, Kizza Besigye, in the lead-up to national elections, later using extralegal force to ensure that Besigye, even after being granted bail, could not walk free (Gloppen et al 2008:68-77). Though donors largely expressed their dissatisfaction with these developments through private and public criticisms, the UK, Ireland, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands all suspended or re-directed part of their aid package to Uganda in 2006/07 by way of protest – the first and only time the Museveni regime has been subjected to political
conditionality (Makara et al 2008:268-271). The crisis in Somalia, therefore, provided Kampala with an opportunity to re-focus donor minds. By once again involving itself in a regional peacekeeping exercise, particularly one which also entailed fighting an alleged al-Qaeda affiliate, the regime was able both to re-cast itself according to those positive narratives previously promoted so successfully to donors and also to move away from those more negative associations which had become attached to international perceptions of Uganda in the aftermath of the third term and election controversies. Certainly this succeeded in practical terms; in 2006 donors disbursed US$1,554 million to the country but by 2008, a year after AMISOM’s mission begun, this had risen by over 20% to US$1,891 million (OECD 2009). Washington’s 2008 contribution was particularly generous in comparison to that provided in 2006 – increasing by 43% to US$353 million in only two years (OECD 2009).

Perhaps understandably, there is no ‘smoking gun’ evidence which dispels beyond dispute the more speculative elements of this theory. Third World leaders are rarely happy to be painted as ‘puppets’ of Western governments in relation to foreign policy decisions and, as noted, the Museveni regime has, on a number of occasions, explicitly stated that its involvement in Somalia has ‘nothing to do’ with a desire to influence donors. It is interesting to note, however, a letter sent in August 2006 by the Whitaker Group to President Bush’s National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley, and his Senior Director for African Affairs, Cindy Courville. The letter, sent ‘on behalf of President Yoweri Museveni’, requested an ‘urgent’ meeting between the US and Ugandan leaders at the upcoming UN General Assembly in order to discuss Somalia and notes that ‘President Museveni shares President Bush’s particular concern about Somalia and its potential as a writhing hotbed of terrorism given that country’s lack of governance and its strategic location’. It goes on to say that ‘President Museveni was...among the first African
Heads of State to support President Bush in the war on terrorism...[and]...would like to talk to [him] about building regional consensus around a policy aimed at keeping Somalia out of terrorist hands’ (Whitaker Group 2006).

Though a military intervention is not overtly suggested (the letter being sent only a few months after the Islamic Courts’ takeover of Mogadishu), it is telling that the note once again depicts Uganda and Museveni as key donor allies in the War on Terror. In this case, however, it actively positions Kampala as a regime equally concerned by the Somali threat as the US. Furthermore, after reminding the White House security chief of Uganda’s lengthy history as a reliable ally in this regard, it makes clear that Museveni is willing, indeed eager, to work with Washington to deal with the problem. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that later in the year, when donors began to cast around for African states to contribute to AMISOM, they turned to Uganda. It is also noteworthy that, since the intervention, Ugandan involvement in Somalia has been gradually incorporated into regime narratives aimed at Western audiences. This has been carried out in a cautious fashion to prevent domestic or regional opponents claiming that Uganda has become a Western proxy but has nevertheless occurred. Thus, in a 2009 interview, the Ugandan Foreign Minister denied a link between donors and Uganda’s role in AMISOM but nevertheless made sure to refer to his country’s ‘long-standing relationship with the United States against terrorism’ alongside a warning on the danger al-Shabaab posed to other states in the region (Foreign Policy 10/08/09).

Counter-Arguments

The argument that Ugandan involvement in Somalia has been partly-motivated by a desire to bolster positive narratives on the Museveni regime in an effort to secure continued international
support can perhaps be contested from two perspectives. Firstly, it could be argued that AMISOM has simply been a *quid pro quo* in the donor-Ugandan relationship and that theories on perceptions and image complicate a fundamentally simple issue. From this perspective, donors are fully aware of Kampala’s many flaws in governance but have nevertheless increased their support since 2007 because AMISOM serves their regional interests. When Uganda leaves Mogadishu donor assistance may well diminish since Uganda will no longer be serving as ‘useful’ a purpose.

Secondly, and linked to this point, the argument of this paper appears to suggest that donors have been easily manipulated by Museveni and, consequently, perceive his regime according to certain ‘positive’ narratives (such as guarantor of stability or ally against terror) rather than other more ‘negative’ narratives. In the case of ‘Uganda as the regional peacemaker’, any Africanist commentator would be aware that this ‘image’ of Ugandan foreign policy is highly contentious. Not only was Kampala one of the leading belligerents in the 1998-2003 Congo war, one of the most devastating conflicts in recent African history, it has also supported rebels in Rwanda and Sudan during the 1990s, nearly come to blows with Kenya in the 1980s and 2000s and has frequently eschewed peaceful means for military solutions in its domestic conflict with the LRA. Is it fair, therefore, to imply that donors and diplomats dealing with Uganda, most of whom have been educated to a very high standard and many of whom have spent several years living in the country, are not also aware of the discrepancies between ‘images’ promoted by the regime and the Ugandan reality?

Interviews undertaken in Kampala, Washington and London between 2008-2011 with a wide range of such officials would suggest that it is not. Many of these individuals were fully aware of
many of the failings of the Museveni government, particularly in relation to democratisation, corruption, use of the military and security services and human rights issues in northern Uganda. Furthermore, the contents of alleged US Kampala Embassy documents leaked by the Wikileaks website in 2010 underline the fact that many donors ‘see past’ the regime’s image management. In one cable, purportedly sent to the State Department by the US Ambassador, Jerry Lanier, in October 2009, Museveni’s ‘autocratic tendencies’ are referred to along with criticism of ‘Uganda’s pervasive corruption’. Lanier also subverts another frequently promoted image of Uganda-that of a ‘model’ of economic reform-by suggesting that these domestic deteriorations have ‘eroded Uganda’s status as an African success story’ (Guardian 08/12/10).

In responding to these two criticisms, it is necessary to make two points relating to donor foreign and development policy-making. First, while donor perceptions of the nature of foreign governments are founded most basically upon understandings of those governments’ actions (for example, Uganda supporting the Iraq War or intervening in Somalia), that is not to say that these perceptions last only as long as the actions in question. One of the main arguments of this paper is that the Museveni regime has, in its dealings with donors, attempted to incorporate elements of its past, present and future regional activities into overarching narratives so that donors will continuously see it through these lenses irrespective of whether or not it is currently involved in, for example, a regional peacekeeping initiative such as AMISOM. Similarly, donors will always have regional interests in eastern Africa and thus regimes such as Uganda’s will always be seen as potentially valuable in the future, even if they are not actively promoting a donor-favoured agenda at that particular moment. As evidenced from the 2006 letter from the Whitaker Group to the White House, Ugandan image management has also entailed the constant reminding of donors of Kampala’s past and therefore potential future significance as an ally and consequently
it is not possible to claim that Uganda’s involvement in AMISOM has not been part of a strategy to manage donor perceptions. The fact that donors turned to Uganda in late 2006, for example, is arguably because they had been persuaded, after years of image management activity, that Uganda-rather than, for example, Kenya or Sudan-was the most reliable country to look towards in such a context.

Second, while many donors do reject these simplistic images promoted by Kampala there appears to nevertheless be a relationship between, on the one hand, how nuanced an understanding of Uganda donors have and, on the other, how much influence they possess over their government’s own foreign policy. Thus where political officers, governance advisers, desk officers, analysts and even ambassadors in both Kampala and donor capitals have tended to look beyond basic narratives on Uganda, the same can rarely be said for Western ministers, assistant secretaries, foreign ministers and heads of government. This is, of course, a consequence of this latter group’s much wider geographical and political remit within which Africa in general, and Uganda specifically, rarely commands much attention. It is this group, however, which also makes key decisions on overall policy towards states such as Uganda and outlines the major government priorities for engaging with its regime. Given time constraints and the relative lack of importance of Uganda in Western foreign policy it is not at all clear, therefore, that these decision-makers regularly read or hear summaries of more critical analyses of the Museveni regime penned by their subordinates which might then alter their perceptions. Equally, even if they do read them, the reports or cables would need to consistently depict Kampala in very negative terms in order to penetrate existing, positive narratives and convince ministers to change course. One of the hallmarks of donor-Ugandan relations since the 1990s, however, has been a notable lack of consistency in donor assessments made.
With this in mind, it is interesting to note that, with Somalia as much as with any other issue, the Museveni regime has focused its energy on managing the perceptions of the more senior officials in Washington and London. Indeed, more critical mid-level donor personnel, particularly in Kampala, have often been kept at arm’s length by the regime or even simply ‘dealt with through the media’ until their tour of duty has ended (Fisher 2011). In the lead-up to and since Uganda’s joining of AMISOM, therefore, the Museveni government has devoted a great deal of energy to building solid and personalised relations with the two most significant US policy-makers with regard to Africa: George W Bush and his Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs between 2005-2009, Jendayi Frazer. This has been carried out through the regime’s arranging and soliciting of recurrent bilateral meetings in Kampala, Washington and New York between Museveni, Frazer and, less frequently, Bush such as that at the UN suggested by Rosa Whitaker in her August 2006 letter. Relationships of trust and mutual understanding have also been fostered through Museveni’s repeated telephoning of these individuals to offer advice and counsel on regional issues; a former White House official notes that the Ugandan leader would often ‘reach out’ to his US counterpart in this manner during the mid-2000s and the two spoke on a regular basis. He has also commented that, by 2007, Museveni and Frazer enjoyed a ‘very close personal friendship’.14

There has been more to this strategy of ‘personalising diplomacy’, however, than simply gaining the trust and support of major donor policy-makers. In attempting to conduct Ugandan-US relations through the personal interactions of certain senior officials, the Ugandan regime has been able to cultivate a diplomatic environment where image management strategies are far easier to employ. Using media interviews or think tank speeches to convey a narrative to donors,

14 Interview with US official, November 2009 (Washington DC, USA)
for example, is always likely to be less effective a communications strategy than presenting it to
them face-to-face, particularly if a bond of trust already exists. To this end, it is clear that, since
2006, Museveni has endeavoured to centre his interactions with Bush, Frazer and other major
donor officials, such as Gordon Brown, around the Somali mission. In doing so, he has been able
to repeatedly emphasise Uganda’s ‘positive’ image as a ‘guarantor of stability’ and ‘ally against
terror’ and downplay rival, more negative, narratives which junior donor officials may attempt to
advance.

Certainly accounts of such interactions suggest that Museveni has himself taken the initiative in
raising the Somalia issue: after a 2007 meeting between Bush and Museveni, for example, the
former told reporters that ‘the President [Museveni] has got good advice and has got good
judgment when it comes to issues like Somalia’ (White House 2007). Similarly, the summary of
a 2008 meeting between Museveni and Brown in London stated that ‘Mr Museveni briefed Mr
Brown about the developments in Somalia’ (State House, Uganda 2008). White House and State
Department officials have also confirmed that discussions between Bush, Frazer and Museveni
between 2006-2009 were overwhelmingly focused on regional and strategic questions,
particularly in relation to Somalia, while ‘internal’ Ugandan issues such as democratisation and
corruption rarely featured in such exchanges. That this strategy has influenced donor
perceptions of the Museveni regime in a manner intended by Kampala is demonstrated by the
fact that, by the end of his term, according to a Bush administration official, the US President
had come to see Museveni as one of only a ‘handful’ of African leaders who he could turn to
regularly for ‘advice’ on regional issues.

15 Interviews with US officials, November 2009 (Washington DC, USA)
16 Interview with US official, November 2009 (Washington DC, USA)
By personalising links with key donor decision-makers and centring bilateral discussions since 2006 around Somalia, a subject which reinforces images of Uganda as a ‘guarantor of stability’ and ‘ally against terror’, the Ugandan regime has therefore been able to ensure that these key officials’ views of Uganda are less likely to be influenced by competing narratives, even those promoted by their own foreign service officers. In the US case, Kampala’s work has been aided by Bush and Frazer’s personal and institutional preoccupation with terrorism, security and geostrategy in foreign policy since 2001.

**Concluding remarks: Managing perceptions and securing agency**

This paper has argued that Uganda’s decision to intervene in Somalia as part of AMISOM, while influenced by important domestic and regional factors, has also been part of a long-term effort to manage donor perceptions. This image management strategy has involved the undertaking by Kampala of various domestic, regional and international actions and policies which can be presented, through skilful engagement with major donor officials, Western media organisations, lobbying groups and think tanks, as part of simplistic, but nevertheless potent, narratives on Uganda’s continued ‘importance’ to its donors. These narratives, for the most part accepted by at least more senior donor policy-makers, have convinced the donor community to persist in supporting the Museveni government in spite of its increasingly autocratic and corrupt nature and its history of destabilising, even invading, neighbouring states. Involvement in AMISOM, it has been argued, has been a means for the regime to bolster already-developed and compelling narratives on Uganda as a ‘guarantor of stability’ and ‘ally in the War on Terror’ and thereby re-focus donor perceptions on more ‘positive’ images of Uganda after a difficult period in donor-Ugandan relations during 2005-2006.
These conclusions raise important questions on the character of African agency in the international system, particularly since donors have often used the immense leverage afforded them as providers of aid to force similarly autocratic and aid-dependent African states to democratise and deal with high-level corruption, most notably in Kenya. How have states such as Uganda, Rwanda and Ethiopia managed to largely retain donor support without these ‘conditionalities’, while Kenya, Malawi, Zambia and others have not? If successful ‘image management’ can be said to be part of the answer to this question, at least in Uganda’s case, can this strategy therefore be seen as a means to secure agency with donors in an otherwise highly asymmetric relationship?

Is it even meaningful to refer to this process as ‘securing agency’, however, when the ‘product’ of such agency – continued international support and greater autonomy in domestic political decisions – is something that most non-African states either have no need for or take for granted. The overarching ‘structure’ of aid dependency has mediated and permeated the entire Ugandan-donor relationship since 1986 and, indeed, has made image management necessary, arguably as a regime survival strategy. Can agency - definable, perhaps, as the intended ‘exercising of power’ (Wight 2006: 178) – therefore exist in such circumstances?

Scholars such as Hill, Hay and Cerny have argued for an understanding of the international system which goes beyond simply a dichotomy between ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ (Hay 1995: 193-198). Instead they make two convincing claims. Firstly, following Giddens (1979), that structure and agency are mutually-constituted rather than separate, oppositional entities, and are in a ‘perpetual process of interaction’ (Hill 2004: 26). Consequently, structures such as aid
dependence have the potential to be ‘both constraining and enabling’ for international actors (Hay 1995: 205). Secondly, and leading on from this, that structures are not fixed or permanent and thus, in some historical circumstances, can provide greater ‘wriggle room’ to actors than in others. Indeed, Cerny concludes that, though the limitations placed upon actors by structures must be acknowledged, agency can nevertheless be secured in even the ‘tightest’ of conditions if an actor chooses to acquire it either by challenging or subverting a structure (Cerny 2000: 436-439).

Through managing donor perceptions, therefore, the Ugandan regime has chosen to subvert the structural logic of aid dependence where donors impose political and economic conditionalities upon aid recipients based on their own interpretations of the recipient’s character and actions. Image management takes advantage of two realities which undermine this logic. Firstly, the fact that donors are reluctant to impose more stringent conditionalities upon regimes which they perceive as useful in other areas, notably trade or foreign policy (Crawford 2000: 232-233). Secondly, that these perceptions are based on incomplete information regarding foreign regimes and therefore can be influenced or manipulated by interested actors. This is particularly true for Africa since key donor policy-makers rarely have the time or inclination to look beyond tropes or generalisations when it comes to understanding most African states.

Thus, in employing image management strategies Kampala has been able to influence these perceptions to emphasise ‘positive’ narratives and downplay ‘negative’ ones. This has thereby weakened the structural limitations aid dependence places upon its room for manoeuvre. In so far as intervention in Somalia has been a part of these strategies, therefore, it can be said to have been a means to secure greater agency for Uganda in the international system.
Acknowledgements

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Interviews

Some of the evidence put forward in this paper comes from interviews undertaken with current and former US, UK, Uganda and EU policy-makers, diplomats, legislators, donor officials, academics, journalist and NGO personnel in Uganda, the US and UK between October 2008-July 2010. Many interviewees were happy to have their comments attributed in the doctoral work which this paper is taken from but did not necessarily agree to having them publicised in any other context. Attributions from these interviews, with one exception, have therefore been anonymised in this paper.

Freedom of Information (FOI) Requests

Documents received from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office under the UK Freedom of Information Act (2000)

Request reference FOI 0802-09:

**FOI (2009a): Memo** FCO Official to Head of East Africa Directorate, FCO, Subject: ‘Meeting with Ugandan Foreign Minister Sam Kutesa, Defence Minister Amama Mbabazi and Moses Byaruhanga, Political Adviser in the President’s Office (14 April 2005)

Documents received from the UK Ministry of Defence under the UK Freedom of Information Act (2000)

Request reference PF23-09-2009-171119-002:

**FOI (2009b): Annex** Training Provided to Members of the Uganda People’s Defence Forces: 2006-09

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