

Managing Sovereignty Through Ambiguity: Kenya–Uganda Relations And The Migingo Island Dispute

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Abstract: Border conflicts remain a persistent obstacle to interstate relations, especially where sovereignty claims compete with economic resources and weak states' domestic publics. The Migingo Island dispute between Kenya and Uganda exemplifies how countries cope with territorial disagreements without recourse to militarized conflict or legal resolution. This article explores the role of strategic ambiguity in the management of the Migingo Island dispute. Based on realist and constructivist perspectives, this research uses a qualitative case study approach, analyzing official communiqués, bilateral agreements, parliament debates and secondary literature. The evidence illustrates that strategic ambiguity served as a diplomatic tool that protected sovereignty discourses, placated domestic publics, and sustained region-wide integration through the East African Community. The article concludes that ambiguity was a strategic approach to conflict management in the current disagreement, rather than diplomatic hesitation in resolving the conflict. By developing a theory of strategic ambiguity in African border politics, the paper advances IR literature on non-escalatory disputes in the Global South.

Keywords: Strategic ambiguity; border diplomacy; Migingo Island; Kenya–Uganda relations; African interstate relations

1. Introduction

Territorial conflicts are an important feature of inter-state relations despite the development and consolidation of international legal principles regarding sovereignty and borders. In Africa, these conflicts are largely informed by colonial border demarcations, competition for natural resources, and challenges of post-independence state and nation-building (Herbst, 2000; Englebert et al., 2002). While some of these conflicts are characterized by the use of violence and warfare, others are contained in a state of tension without being fully resolved or violently contested.

The conflict between Kenya and Uganda over Migingo Island in Lake Victoria is an example of a border conflict that is not violent but also not fully resolved. Although Migingo is a small island geographically, its surrounding water is economically important due to the presence of fishing resources and also strategically important due to its location in Lake Victoria basin. Following the deployment of Ugandan security forces to Migingo Island in 2008, tensions between Kenya and Uganda escalated significantly. The conflict was accompanied by nationalist rhetoric and parliamentary protests in both countries.

This article seeks to further argue that the prolonged management of the Migingo conflict was not an outcome of diplomatic weakness but rather an outcome of strategic ambiguity, an approach that deliberately avoids definitive legal or military resolution in favor of flexibility and stability. The research question is: How did strategic ambiguity serve as a diplomatic approach in the management of the Migingo Island conflict between Kenya and Uganda?

In answering the research question, the article seeks to make two contributions. First, the article seeks to extend the concept of strategic ambiguity beyond traditional deterrence and alliance politics to border diplomacy. Second, the article seeks to contribute to the African International Relations agenda by furthering the understanding of ambiguity as a rational approach to diplomacy.

1.2 Problem Statement

For many years, territorial contestation in Africa presented a major obstacle to interstate relations, with many instances of prolonged standoffs or violent conflict between States. A prime example is the Migingo Island dispute, which erupted in 2008-2009 and involved claims of sovereignty over a very small yet economically significant piece of territory in Lake Victoria, resulting in additional political pressure from within each country, debates in Parliament and nationalism within both Countries. However, this dispute did not escalate further into conflict and it remains unresolved by either judicial or legal means.

Scholarly literature on Africa's territorial conflicts is largely focused on understanding legal adjudication of boundary disputes, the legacy of colonialism and the power asymmetries that exist between African countries when resolving these conflicts; however, none of these theories provide enough insight into Kenya and Uganda's ability to continue working together cooperatively, maintaining their East African Community regional integration commitments and avoiding becoming militarized due to unresolved sovereignty issues.

Thus, this research study has been designed to fill a critical analytical gap in current literature by examining the diplomatic strategy of strategic ambiguity and utilizing it as a deliberate policy tool employed by both Nations involved in the Migingo Island dispute.

Lack of systematic analysis of how ambiguity functioned as a tool for conflict resolution means there is not enough information available to gain insight into the use of non-coercive or non-legal methods in boundary diplomacy in Africa. In the absence of this type of analysis, it is probable that policymakers will misinterpret restraint as a lack of decision-making capacity, rather than viewing it as a carefully considered tactic for maintaining peace, promoting cooperation, and achieving regional stability.

Objectives of the Study

General Objective

To examine the role and benefits of strategic ambiguity in the management of Kenya–Uganda relations in the context of the Migingo Island dispute.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Strategic Ambiguity in International Relations

The concept of strategic ambiguity has been largely theorized and applied within the fields of security studies (Schelling, 1966) and diplomacy (Jervis, 1978) as a way to use vague or non-committal policy positions in order to maximize flexibility, deter potential adversaries, and limit escalation in cases of sensitive conflict. In doing so, Jervis (1978) notes that, by leveraging ambiguity, states can influence the expectations of their adversaries without committing themselves to fixed or rigid policy objectives. Scholars in that tradition (e.g., Edelman, 1977) have also described the use of ambiguity as a discursive device that allows states to send multiple signals to various target audiences while being free to choose from among many definitions of their ambiguous message.

The United States' approach toward the Taiwan Strait has been an example of strategic ambiguity on a global scale. Since 1979, the United States has maintained an ambiguous commitment to defend Taiwan should the People's Republic of China (PRC) attack; this ambiguity is meant to deter both the PRC from attacking militarily and Taiwan from unilaterally moving toward independence (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025; RSIS, 2025). Because of the dual deterrence strategy (sometimes called dual ambiguity), scholars argue that there has been peace in the Taiwan Strait for decades (Hoo & Sworn, 2020; Benson & Niou, 2000). However, critics are also claiming that with the shift in geopolitical dynamics, strategic ambiguity may be eroding and advocates are calling for "strategic clarity" to formalize defense commitments (Foreign Policy Analysis, 2024; Financial Times, 2025). These arguments show both the utility and the limitations of strategic ambiguity in managing international tensions without leading to escalation.

In addition to the example of Taiwan, there are several additional examples of how strategic ambiguity can provide for the management of a complicated diplomatic environment. For example, Israel has a long-standing policy of nuclear opacity; in other words, it neither

confirms nor denies its nuclear capability. Because of this, Israel achieves its goal of deterring adversaries while avoiding regional arms races and/or creating a political backlash (Braga, 2018).

Just like the Paris Climate Agreement, other multilateral agreements have used vague wording regarding differentiated responsibilities in order to bring together very different countries into a cooperative framework, rather than requiring all States to meet the same obligations. As such, international organisations are able to demonstrate the utility of strategic ambiguity as a tool for facilitating cooperation in global governance (LinkedIn report, 2025).

2.2 Strategic Ambiguity in Regional Contexts

Strategic ambiguity is a way for powerfully situated nations on continents to effectively deal with powerful nations trying to divide them into separate factions by not aligning closely with either of those factions. An example of this can be seen in how some nations choose to hedge their bets by maintaining open-ended positions on important issues, thus allowing them to have mutually beneficial relations with multiple powers and prevent being locked into formal alliances (International Journal of Social Sciences Perspectives, 2025).

In Asia as well as many other regions of the world that are experiencing similar types of conflicts, ambiguities of the type described above have been used in many situations involving disputed borders. For example, in the ongoing China-India border conflict along the "line of actual control" (LAC), India has so far refused to publicly disclose the specific threshold at which India will respond militarily to hostile action taking place near this border (Policy of Deliberate Ambiguity, 2025). This is an example of both a strategic ambiguity being used to deter spheres of influence, as well as a broader pattern of the strategic use of ambiguous legal instruments by states in order to avoid creating any legally binding obligations that would then trigger any type of destabilizing reaction.

At various times, Iran has used vague practices to create ambiguity in its nuclear and regional security policies to complicate its adversaries' calculations, maintain leverage, and avoid war (Ambiguous Approach analysis, 2025). The use of ambiguous practices is part of Iran's broader political strategy of using the ambiguity of certain environmental features to create additional political ambiguity, where firm political positions can incite formal punishment or lead to costly concessions on behalf of Iran.

2.3 Strategic Ambiguity and Border Diplomacy in Africa

While the majority of the literature surrounding strategic ambiguity emphasizes great power rivalries and security alliances outside of Africa, the ideas behind them can be applied to Africa's approaches to border diplomacy. Many cross-border disputes between African nations are rarely—or not at all—"settled" through some form of international legal jurisdiction, but rather through informal arrangements created via negotiation or an ongoing existing arrangement (Touval 1972; Brownlie 1979). There exists a number of institutional norms that exist within the African Union and various sub-regional organisations (e.g. East African Community) that highlight the prioritization of peaceful resolution and the promotion of cooperative engagement, which allows for ambiguity in diplomatic posture in order to avoid the expense associated with being adjudicated through the legal process or in a military escalation (Englebert et al. 2002; Khadiagala 2010).

This paper utilises the framework of strategic ambiguity to characterise the diplomatic behaviour between Kenya and Uganda with respect to their competing claims over Migingo Island as purposeful flexibility (as opposed to indecision). The analyses of this dispute have previously primarily revolved around issues of sovereignty, rights to fish and security presences (Mwagiru 2010; Ochieng 2011); none have specifically framed the protracted struggle over Migingo as a strategic ambiguity, however—this paper addresses the gap in the literature through the application of strategic ambiguity theory and analysis into the dynamics associated with African border disputes.

Theoretical Framework: Strategic Ambiguity, Deterrence, and Crisis Management

This study is anchored in a synthetic theoretical framework that includes realism, deterrence theory, and constructivist insights into discourse and legitimacy to explain how strategic ambiguity operates as a tool for managing interstate conflict.

Strategic Ambiguity and Deterrence Theory

Strategic ambiguity has a strong connection to deterrence and coercive diplomacy in realist theory. According to Schelling (1966), uncertainty can be used as a tool for strategic advantage because it impacts adversary expectations and does not require specific ties to be made by adversaries. Therefore, by leaving uncertain what the outcome will be, states create caution in their opponent's consideration

of escalating, thus lowering the incentive to escalate. Jervis (1978) also notes that ambiguity can help reduce the security dilemma between states by allowing states to demonstrate resolve and leave open their ability to reduce the level of escalation.

There are several empirical examples of this logic being applied in international relations with security issues. An example can be found with the United States' historical policy regarding Taiwan. U.S. Policy regarding Taiwan has been to maintain strategic ambiguity to deter both the Peoples Republic of China (adversarial state) and the Republic of China (Taiwan) from engaging in confrontation in ways that would create clear lines of demarcation. (Benson & Niou, 2000); (Goldstein, 2000). While the logic of this example is small in terms of the level of challenge it presents to both states, it should also be noted that the principles of this logic could also be used in small dispute resolution.

Using deterrence theory, we can evaluate Kenya's inactivity in deploying military forces and Uganda's limited presence on Migingo Island. Each State demonstrated resolve but did not engage in behavior that would have created incentives for escalation.

Strategic Ambiguity and Crisis Management

Strategic ambiguity may be essential in preventing disputes from escalating into military conflict. George (1991) describes crisis management as the ability to use calibrated signals, negotiation and restraint to prevent disputes from escalating to violence. As a result, the existence of ambiguity provides space for diplomatic efforts and allows for face-saving compromise solutions between disputing parties.

The research conducted about international crises indicates that leaders can effectively use ambiguity to manage uncertainty relative to the potential for escalation of disputes, especially those that involve issues pertaining to sovereignty or national identity (Snyder & Dasing, 1977). While the establishment of a concrete legal or military commitment provides normative advantages, such commitments are likely to make it more difficult for a leader to maintain flexibility and therefore increase the likelihood of escalation from a dispute to an armed conflict. Thus, in long-standing disputes, ambiguity may serve as an important stabilizing factor.

In the case of Migingo, the long period over which the dispute has been negotiated primarily through joint technical committees rather than through adjudication has created an environment in which the parties to the dispute have been able to avoid militarizing their dispute because of the strong nationalistic pressures that exist.

Constructivist Perspectives: Discourse, Legitimacy, and Domestic Audiences

Constructivists clarify realist ideas about how to operate under conditions of ambiguity when strategizing. According to Edelman (1977), political speech is generally stated over-broadly so that it will apply to more than one audience at a time: leaders can appear 'strong' at home while being 'cooperative' with other nations.

Putnam (1988) contends that leaders utilize ambiguity in order to balance competing pressures at the two levels of a nation's politics; for instance, they are expected to address the demand for nationalism from their constituents but must also take steps to prevent engaging in an overly expensive international conflict. By utilizing strategic ambiguity, states can continue developing and promoting ideas related to the sovereign state, without demonstrating a willingness to make that idea permanent (due to the "commitment" aspect of it).

Kenya and Uganda's parliamentary debates demonstrate and articulate this notion of performing differences along different levels. For example, members of parliament demanded to see a strong national commitment to protecting their countries' territorial integrity. On the contrary, the executive branch representatives primarily emphasized pursuing peaceful solutions through diplomatic channels or by using proper technical procedures; this demonstrates how leaders can use political maneuvering in a way that is acceptable both within the state and in the international sphere.

3. Methodology

For this research, it was decided to take a qualitative case study approach to develop theories and perform an in-depth examination of the complex nature of diplomatic phenomena (Yin, 2014). Data were collected under four main headings:

1. Official diplomatic statements, including joint communiqués, made by the Governments of Uganda and Kenya (Government of Kenya, 2009; Government of Uganda, 2009).
2. Parliamentary debates from both nations (Hansard) showing topics discussed in Parliament regarding the dispute (Republic of Kenya, 2009, 2016, 2018).

3. Regional Policy documents from the East African Community (EAC) that include principles of cooperative regional (EAC, 1999, 2010) and peaceful dispute resolution.
4. Peer-reviewed articles and policy analyses on African border disputes, including the Migingo dispute (Mwagiru, 2010; Warui, 2014).

The data will be analyzed to find themes indicating ambiguity in the use of language in diplomatic contexts, the policies that were used, and how those policies were enforced. The integration of realist assumptions about the interests of the state and constructivist concepts of discourse and legitimacy is used in the analysis.

Findings

4.1 Ambiguity in Sovereignty Claims

Kenya and Uganda have both declared themselves owners of Migingo Island; however, neither acted decisively with legal processes to confirm its sovereignty.

Kenya claims that it historically used the island and its surrounding waters for its fishing livelihood, while Uganda is primarily focused upon establishing "administrative control" and using its military presence on the island to assert validity to their position. Neither Kenya nor Uganda was interested in seeking a legal determination from the International Court of Justice, indicating a greater desire to utilize diplomatic tactics over clarifying legal matters. In addition, neither party articulated their claim in a manner that would warrant an immediate adjudication or enforcement under domestic or international law.

By articulating claims in the fashion described above, each state preserved its respective claims, while at the same time preventing an irreversible escalation of tensions.

4.2 Managed Security Presence

Security forces from Uganda stayed on the island whereas no military forces were ever deployed by Kenya, and their asymmetry was tolerated through the use of an ambiguous diplomatic process which permitted Kenya to make a purely symbolic protest while avoiding confrontation. The ambiguity also helped to decrease any potential for militarization of Lake Victoria. The small number of Ugandan security personnel created a much more significant difference than the lack of reciprocal deployments by Kenya, which did not show weakness but were relying on diplomatic protests and bilateral mechanisms.

4.3 Economic and Regional Considerations

Both nations depend on Lake Victoria as a crucial component of their economies. The strategic ambiguity surrounding the lake has permitted fish and trade to continue, and for cooperation to take place between the East African Community member states. The failure of either state to adopt this same position would have put greater obstacles in the way of regional integration (EAC, 2010). Furthermore, both countries had an interest in the integration agenda of the EAC and were required by the normative constraints associated with this agenda not to engage in open confrontation.

4.4 Domestic Political Balancing

Domestic pressure forced both governments to defend their sovereignty. Through the use of ambiguous diplomacy, leaders were able to maintain cooperative relationships while still appearing firm in their domestic signals. This is consistent with Putnam's (1988) two-level game theory in that leaders need to balance their domestic and international constraints. The use of ambiguous diplomacy will limit severe domestic political backlash; therefore, providing the leader with continued diplomatic flexibility.

4.5 Managed Security Presence and Diplomatic Restraint

Kenya did not respond to Uganda's small security presence on the island in a military manner, but rather with protests and debate in its parliament (Republic of Kenya, 2009). As these countries negotiated their differing claims, both used strategic ambiguity as a way to maintain the status quo without introducing the possibility of militarization into either state.

4.3 Economic Interdependence and Regional Norms

Kenya and Uganda benefit from the fisheries of Lake Victoria which serve as livelihoods for both countries. Both countries have been able to continue with their economies, even during negotiation processes. Moreover, EAC norms emphasize peaceful resolution of disputes; therefore, they helped limit the amount of escalation and continue promoting bilateral relations (EAC, 1999; Khadiagala, 2010). Both countries have a long-standing relationship through economic, political and security relations within the EAC context. Consequently, the existence of strategic ambiguity allowed for separation of solving the Migingo dispute and limited the effects that unresolved claims to territory have on trade, freedom of movement and regional integration efforts (Khadiagala, 2010). The ongoing bilateral cooperation and protection of EAC integration objectives are paramount in the situation surrounding Migingo Island. The importance of Migingo Island is driven by its fisheries, not as much by the land that it occupies. Therefore, strategic ambiguity allows both countries to focus on accessing fishing rights and livelihoods as the primary issues, while restricting rigid enforcement of boundary lines in terms of what is in the best interest of the local communities, thus, limiting the extent of economic damage to local communities (Herbst, 2000; Mwagiru, 2010).

4.4 Domestic Political Management

Strategic ambiguity was also used for national political purposes too. A look at parliamentary debates in Kenya illustrates how high levels of national sentiment were being expressed through demands for government action against the executive's focus on diplomacy. This is consistent with Putnam's (1988) two-level game model, where the international leader has to balance both domestic and international pressure from each of the two games.

4.5 Conflict Avoidance and De-escalation

Both Kenya and Uganda avoided a military response to the conflict over Migingo Island by exercising diplomatic ambiguity. Both countries' lack of clear public statements about their respective claims to sovereignty over Lake Victoria established an environment that was conducive to avoiding an armed conflict; this is consistent with the logic of security dilemma, which calls for restraint amidst uncertainty (Jervis, 1978; Schelling, 1966). Refusing to take positions regarding boundaries coupled with ongoing nationalist rhetoric allowed these two states to avoid escalation of this dispute into an inter-state conflict. Further, the actions of the two countries allowed Migingo Island to remain peaceful while being located in a strategically significant inland waterway.

4.6 Facilitation of Technical and Diplomatic Engagement

Instead of making the parties reach a quick settlement, strategic ambiguity has given rise to possible joint technical committees, verification exercises, and negotiated fishing agreements. All of these incremental developments have reduced tensions and reframed the conflict from one of a zero-to-sum territorial conflict to a technical and administrative problem (Mwagiru, 2010; Ochieng, 2011).

5. Conclusion

The conflict over Migingo Island illustrates how intentionally and purposefully using ambiguity is a tool in border diplomacy. Instead of appearing unable to decide on an outcome, it allowed both countries to relate their conflicting claims of sovereignty and economic interests as well as their respective domestic political expectations while maintaining good relations between them and ensuring that the region remains stable.

By applying the idea of strategic ambiguity to border disputes in Africa, we have provided an additional perspective that contributes to the ongoing debates within International Relations about ways to manage conflicts and diplomacy in the Global South. Future research might develop the framework above as a comparative tool to analyze multiple border disputes in Africa or to investigate the conditions under which strategic ambiguity fails to play a role in the use of conflict resolution strategies.

Recommendations

1. Enabling strategic ambiguity within the conflict resolution framework between Uganda and Kenya as an interim diplomatic option for the management of sensitive and contentious territorial disputes between the two states will require official recognition via structured

joint mechanisms that allow for unresolved questions of territorial sovereignty to coexist alongside cooperative pursuits of security, trade and natural resources.

2. Deepening the role of established technical committees and administrative support between Uganda and Kenya in relation to geographical boundaries, management of fisheries, and security of the lakes will aid in reducing the politics of disputes and sustain constructive collaboration while awaiting a final resolution.

3. Dial and communicate with Parliament's executives to coordinate foreign policies because of the strong effects of Parliament debate on establishing the direction of a foreign policy. Establish a regular reestablishment of the communication between the executive staff, lawmakers and the executive to better facilitate establishment of a unified domestic political message that is consistent with longer-term objectives as a means of minimizing the influences of populist sources.

4. The East African Community (EAC) should be used as an instrument of conflict-management rather than solely as an instrument of economic integration by strengthening its institution and using the established institutions as a means to normalize strategic ambiguity through neutral sites for negotiation, mediation and confidence-building within the context of establishments of economic, social and political relationships between Kenya and Uganda.

5. Prioritising the Protection of People and Economies above Finalizing Borders

The need to ensure people's means of survival is primary. Fishing communities located around Misingo Island require a high level of oversight in their mean of subsistence. Collaborative approaches and joint licensing agreements could reduce the risk of conflict and create a strong foundation for joint diplomacy built upon common economic benefit.

6. Use Lessons Learned in Other Boundary Disputes in Africa

The Misingo Island dispute provides evidence that not all territorial disputes are going to have an immediate legal resolution. Therefore, countries in Africa with similar disagreements should consider using strategic ambiguity where the legal, political, or security conditions make it impossible to reach a final settlement.

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