



U.S. Geopolitical Interests in Cameroon: A Multidimensional Analysis Through the Lens of Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism

J. Ndumbe Anyu & Samuel Belsham Moki

1. Professor of Public Policy and Public Management at the School of Business and Public Administration at the University of the District of Columbia, Washington, DC
2. Director of the Department of the Environment at Prince George's County Government, Maryland, U.S.A

Abstract: Cameroon occupies a strategically significant position in Central Africa, serving as a regional economic hub and a frontline state in counterterrorism operations against Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa (IS WA). The United States has historically viewed Cameroon as a stabilizing force, yet recent developments—including the Anglophone crisis, governance challenges, and rising great power competition—have complicated bilateral relations. Drawing on realism, liberalism, and constructivism, this article analyzes the security, institutional, and sociopolitical dimensions of U.S. engagement. It argues that America's interests in Cameroon are shaped by the interplay of material threats, normative commitments, and identity based narratives. The article concludes that U.S. policymakers must adopt a calibrated approach that balances counterterrorism cooperation with credible support for democratic governance, civilian protection, and long term stability.

INTRODUCTION

Cameroon's geopolitical relevance stems from its location along the Gulf of Guinea, its role as an economic conduit for landlocked Central African states, and its exposure to multiple internal conflicts. The United States has historically viewed Cameroon as a stabilizing force in a volatile region, yet recent developments—including the Anglophone crisis, Boko Haram/IS-WA activity, and governance challenges—have complicated bilateral relations. Congressional reports highlight Cameroon's political uncertainty, especially surrounding President Paul Biya's advanced age and unclear succession plans, as a growing strategic concern for U.S. policymakers (Congress.gov, 2025). To understand America's evolving posture toward Cameroon, this article applies three major international relations theories—realism, liberalism, and constructivism—to illuminate the security, institutional, and sociopolitical dimensions of U.S. engagement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: REALISM, LIBERALISM, AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

International relations scholarship offers multiple lenses for understanding how states define interests, interpret threats, and construct foreign policy. Applying realism, liberalism, and constructivism to U.S.-Cameroon relations reveal how material power, institutional commitments, and sociopolitical meaning interact to shape American engagement.

Realism: Power, Security, and Strategic Competition

Realism views the international system as anarchic, requiring states to prioritize survival, security, and power. From this perspective, U.S. engagement in Cameroon is best understood as a response to regional instability, terrorist threats, and great-power competition.

Cameroon's proximity to the Lake Chad Basin places it at the center of U.S. counterterrorism strategy against Boko Haram and IS-WA. Instability in this region threatens not only Cameroon's internal cohesion but also the broader balance of power in Central Africa (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Realism explains why Washington continues to invest in security cooperation with Cameroon despite governance concerns: Cameroon's stability directly affects U.S. strategic interests.

Realism also illuminates U.S. anxieties about China's expanding infrastructure footprint and Russia's growing security presence in Central Africa. Congressional reporting identifies Cameroon as a potential site of geopolitical contestation where rival powers seek influence through loans, military partnerships, and political alignment (Congress.gov, 2025). In realist terms, Cameroon becomes a strategic buffer whose alignment affects regional power dynamics. Thus, realism frames U.S. policy as a balancing act: maintaining influence, preventing extremist expansion, and countering rival powers in a region where instability could rapidly escalate.

Liberalism: Institutions, Governance, and Cooperative Engagement

Liberalism emphasizes the role of institutions, democratic norms, and interdependence in shaping state behavior. From this perspective, U.S. engagement in Cameroon is driven not only by security concerns but also by commitments to governance reform, human rights, and development cooperation.

U.S. support for decentralization reforms, civil society strengthening, and electoral transparency reflects liberal assumptions that strong institutions reduce conflict and promote accountable governance (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Liberal theory explains why Washington conditions certain forms of military assistance on human rights compliance: adherence to international norms is seen as essential for long-term stability.

Assistance for development, particularly in health, education, and refugee protection—further demonstrates liberal priorities. These programs reflect a belief that cooperative engagement and capacity building create mutual benefits and reduce the likelihood of conflict. Reports from the Global Protection Cluster (2025) underscore how humanitarian interventions are tied to liberal commitments, civilian protection, and rule-of-law principles. In this view, Cameroon is not merely a security partner but a state whose institutional trajectory matters for regional stability and U.S. normative interests.

Constructivism: Identity, Narratives, and Sociopolitical Meaning

Constructivism highlights how ideas, identity, and social narratives shape state preferences and foreign policy behavior. This lens is essential for understanding the symbolic and political dimensions of U.S.-Cameroon relations.

Cameroon's political elites frequently frame foreign engagement through narratives of sovereignty, anti-imperialism, or suspicion of Western influence. These narratives shape public perceptions of U.S. governance initiatives and can either legitimize or delegitimize external involvement (Murrey, 2024). Constructivism explains why identical policy actions—such as support for civil society—may be interpreted differently depending on domestic political orientation and discourse.

Activists and civil society actors also deploy identity-based narratives to critique governance, mobilize support, or challenge state authority. These narratives influence how U.S. democracy-promotion efforts are received and can affect the credibility of American soft power.

Constructivism further clarifies how norms around civilian protection, democratic participation, and state legitimacy shape U.S. diplomatic expectations. Washington's emphasis on human rights is not only a legal requirement but also a reflection of normative identity embedded in U.S. foreign policy institutions.

Integrative Synthesis

Taken together, these theories reveal the multidimensional nature of America's geopolitical interests in Cameroon:

- **Realism** explains U.S. security cooperation and great-power competition.
- **Liberalism** explains U.S. governance, development, and institutional support.
- **Constructivism** explains identity politics and sociopolitical narratives shaping bilateral perceptions.

This integrated theoretical foundation provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing U.S. policy choices and Cameroon's evolving strategic significance.

SECURITY INTERESTS AND COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY

The Lake Chad Basin and Boko Haram

U.S. engagement in Cameroon has been heavily shaped by counterterrorism operations targeting Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa (IS-WA). Cameroon's Far North region remains a frontline area where extremist groups exploit porous borders, limited state presence, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. These dynamics create persistent security threats that extend beyond Cameroon's borders and affect regional stability in Nigeria, Chad, and Niger.

The United States has supported regional security initiatives through training, intelligence sharing, and equipment provision to Cameroonian forces, particularly the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR). These efforts align with realist priorities to prevent extremist expansion and maintain regional stability (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Washington's engagement reflects a strategic calculation: Cameroon's ability to contain extremist threats directly influences U.S. interests in preventing safe havens for groups hostile to American security.

Human Rights Constraints

Despite security cooperation, persistent human rights violations complicate U.S. engagement. Protection risk assessments document unlawful arrests, arbitrary detentions, torture, enforced disappearances, and restrictions on movement across conflict-affected regions (Global Protection Cluster, 2025). These violations trigger legal and ethical constraints under U.S. foreign assistance laws, including the Leahy Law, which prohibits support to foreign military units implicated in human rights abuses.

Liberal commitments to human rights shape Washington's conditional approach to military support. U.S. policymakers must balance the need for effective counterterrorism cooperation with the imperative to uphold international norms. This tension illustrates the interplay between realist security imperatives and liberal normative commitments within U.S. foreign policy.

GOVERNANCE, DEMOCRACY, AND POLITICAL STABILITY

Succession Uncertainty and Democratic Backsliding

Cameroon's political system grants extensive executive power to the presidency, and President Paul Biya's decades-long rule has raised concerns about democratic stagnation. Congressional reporting highlights allegations of electoral fraud, voter intimidation, suppression of opposition coalitions, and restrictions on political participation (Congress.gov, 2025). These governance challenges heighten U.S. concerns about potential instability ahead of future elections.

Succession uncertainty further complicates the political landscape. President Biya's advanced age and unclear succession plans create risks of elite fragmentation, contested transitions, and potential unrest. From a realist perspective, political instability threatens regional security; from a liberal perspective, it undermines democratic norms and institutional resilience.

U.S. Diplomatic Priorities

U.S. diplomatic engagement emphasizes governance, human rights, and humanitarian assistance as core pillars of bilateral relations. State Department reporting highlights efforts to support refugee protection, strengthen civil society, and encourage peaceful conflict resolution in Cameroon's Anglophone and Far North regions (U.S. Department of State, 2024). These priorities reflect liberal commitments to institutional strengthening and democratic norms. Diplomatic visits, public statements, and targeted funding initiatives demonstrate Washington's attempt to balance pressure for reform with continued cooperation. Constructivist dynamics also shape diplomatic behavior, as U.S. officials must navigate Cameroonian narratives of sovereignty and anti-imperialism that influence how external engagement is perceived.

HUMANITARIAN AND PROTECTION CONCERNS

Humanitarian conditions in Cameroon have deteriorated due to protracted conflict, climate-related displacement, and widespread human rights violations. Protection analyses

highlight increased gender-based violence, child separation, abductions, destruction of property, and forced displacement across conflict zones (Global Protection Cluster, 2025). These crises affect more than four million people and strain local institutions.

Constructivist insights help explain how these humanitarian conditions shape narratives of state legitimacy. Communities experiencing violence or displacement often question the state's capacity or willingness to protect civilians. These perceptions influence U.S. humanitarian diplomacy, as Washington seeks to support civilian protection while avoiding actions that could be framed as interference.

Humanitarian assistance—particularly in health, education, and refugee support—aligns with liberal commitments to cooperation and interdependence. It also complements realist objectives by reducing instability that extremist groups could exploit.

ECONOMIC INTERESTS AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Cameroon's economy plays a stabilizing role in Central Africa, serving as a commercial hub for landlocked neighbors such as Chad and the Central African Republic. Recent growth has been driven by cocoa, cotton, and infrastructure development, though structural challenges—including inflation, governance constraints, and climate-related shocks—continue to affect economic performance (World Bank, 2025).

While economic ties are not the primary driver of U.S. engagement, they complement broader liberal goals of promoting stability and interdependence. U.S. development initiatives in health, education, and refugee assistance reflect a belief that economic resilience reduces conflict, vulnerability, and strengthens institutional capacity. These programs also support humanitarian objectives by improving access to essential services in conflict-affected regions.

From a realist perspective, economic stability reduces opportunities for extremist recruitment and limits openings for rival powers seeking influence through financial leverage. From a constructivist perspective, economic cooperation shapes perceptions of U.S. engagement, influencing narratives about American intentions and legitimacy.

GREAT-POWER COMPETITION: CHINA AND RUSSIA

China's Expanding Influence

China's presence in Cameroon has grown significantly through infrastructure financing, telecommunications partnerships, and political engagement. Congressional analyses identify China's deepening relationship with Cameroon as a key issue for U.S. policymakers, particularly regarding debt sustainability, digital surveillance risks, and political alignment (Congress.gov, 2025).

Realism explains U.S. concerns about China's expanding footprint: increased Chinese influence could reduce American leverage, reshape regional power dynamics, and create dependencies that limit Cameroon's foreign policy autonomy. China's role in constructing major infrastructure—such as ports, roads, and government buildings—illustrates how economic engagement can translate into strategic influence.

Russia's Strategic Posture

Russia's growing presence in Central Africa—including security partnerships and Wagner Group activity in neighboring states—adds another layer of strategic competition. Although Cameroon has not embraced Russian security assistance to the same extent as some regional counterparts, U.S. policymakers remain attentive to potential shifts (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Realism highlights the risk that political instability or elite fragmentation could create openings for Russian engagement. Constructivism adds nuance by explaining how narratives of sovereignty and anti-imperialism may make Russian overtures appealing to certain political actors, especially if U.S. pressure on governance is perceived as intrusive.

SOCIOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS AND ANTI-IMPERIAL NARRATIVES

Constructivist scholarship highlights how Cameroonian activists and political actors navigate complex relationships with foreign powers. Anti-imperial narratives and state rhetoric portraying activists as “externally supported” shape domestic political debates and influence how foreign engagement is perceived (Murrey, 2024).

These narratives complicate U.S. soft-power strategies. Efforts to support civil society or promote governance reforms may be framed as attempts to undermine sovereignty, especially during politically sensitive periods. Conversely, activists may invoke international norms to legitimize demands for accountability, illustrating how identity-based narratives shape political mobilization.

Understanding these sociopolitical dynamics is essential for effective diplomacy. U.S. policymakers must navigate competing narratives, avoid reinforcing perceptions of external interference, and tailor engagement strategies to local contexts.

STRATEGIC DILEMMAS FOR U.S. POLICY

The United States faces a persistent dilemma: balancing security cooperation with governance and human rights concerns. Excessive pressure on political reform risks pushing Cameroon toward rival powers, while insufficient pressure undermines U.S. credibility and long-term stability goals.

Realism urges continued security cooperation to prevent extremist expansion and maintain regional stability. Liberalism demands credible support for democratic governance, institutional resilience, and civilian protection. Constructivism warns that missteps in diplomatic messaging can reinforce anti-imperial narratives and weaken U.S. soft power.

As Cameroon approaches a politically sensitive period marked by succession uncertainty and ongoing conflict, U.S. policymakers must navigate these tensions carefully. A calibrated approach—one that integrates security assistance with sustained institutional support and culturally attuned diplomacy—offers the most viable path for advancing U.S. interests while contributing to Cameroon's long-term stability.

CONCLUSION

America's geopolitical interests in Cameroon emerge from the intersection of security imperatives, governance concerns, humanitarian obligations, and great-power competition. Cameroon's internal conflicts, succession uncertainty, and exposure to rival external actors make it a strategically important yet politically complex partner for the United States.

Applying realism, liberalism, and constructivism demonstrates that U.S. engagement is shaped simultaneously by material threats, institutional commitments, and sociopolitical narratives. Realism highlights the importance of counterterrorism cooperation and regional stability; liberalism underscores the need for governance reform and humanitarian assistance; constructivism reveals how identity-based narratives influence perceptions of foreign engagement.

For policymakers, the central challenge is balancing counterterrorism cooperation with credible support for democratic governance and civilian protection. Overemphasizing security risks undermining U.S. normative commitments, while excessive pressure on political reform may push Cameroon toward rival powers. A calibrated, multidimensional approach—grounded in security pragmatism, institutional strengthening, and culturally attuned diplomacy—offers the most sustainable path for advancing U.S. interests and supporting Cameroon's long-term stability.

REFERENCES

Congress.gov. (2025). *Cameroon*.

Global Protection Cluster. (2025). *Cameroon protection analysis update*.

Murrey, A. (2024). Slow dissent and worldmaking beyond imperial relations in "Kamer-amère" (Bitter Cameroon). *International Studies Quarterly*, 68(2).

U.S. Department of State. (2024). *Cameroon: Country reports, press statements, and diplomatic updates*.

World Bank. (2025). *Economic performance update: Cameroon*.