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THE EVOLUTION OF THE UK'S RELATIONS WITH FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICAN STATES (2015-2025)

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of the United Kingdom's relations with Francophone West African countries between 2015 and 2025 in the context of Brexit and the Global Britain agenda. Using Role Theory, it analyses how the UK sought to redefine its international role through diplomatic expansion, security cooperation in the Sahel, trade agreements, and development-oriented investments. The study finds that the UK attempted to position itself as a global developmental partner combining security, economic, and governance objectives. However, military coups, geopolitical competition from Russia, China, and the European Union, as well as limitations in the effectiveness of aid and investment programmes, constrained its influence. The analysis reveals significant role conflict, role incongruence, and role contestation between the UK's ambitions and regional perceptions. While the UK increased its engagement in Francophone West Africa, its ability to achieve long-term objectives remained limited by insecurity, political instability, and external competition. The article concludes that Francophone West Africa has become a key testing ground for the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy and its ambition to be recognised as a credible global developmental partner.

Keywords: United Kingdom, Francophone West African Countries, Foreign Policy, Global Britain

Résumé

Cet article analyse l'évolution des relations entre le Royaume-Uni et les États francophones d'Afrique de l'Ouest entre 2015 et 2025 dans le contexte du Brexit et de la stratégie de Global Britain. En mobilisant la théorie des rôles, il étudie la manière dont le Royaume-Uni a cherché à redéfinir sa place sur la scène internationale à travers l'expansion diplomatique, la coopération sécuritaire au Sahel, les accords commerciaux et les investissements orientés vers le développement. Les résultats montrent que le Royaume-Uni a tenté de s'affirmer comme un partenaire mondial du développement conciliant objectifs sécuritaires, économiques et de gouvernance. Toutefois, les coups d'État militaires, la concurrence géopolitique de la Russie, de la Chine et de l'Union européenne, ainsi que les limites de l'efficacité de certains programmes d'aide et d'investissement, ont réduit son influence. L'analyse met en évidence des phénomènes de conflit de rôle, d'incongruence de rôle et de contestation de rôle entre les ambitions britanniques et les perceptions régionales. L'article conclut que l'Afrique de l'Ouest francophone constitue un terrain d'expérimentation majeur de la politique étrangère post-Brexit du Royaume-Uni et de son ambition d'être reconnu comme un partenaire crédible du développement.

Mots-clés: Royaume-Uni, pays francophone de l'Afrique de l'Ouest, politique étrangère, Global Britain

INTRODUCTION

A complex interplay of factors, including colonial legacies, Cold War dynamics, post-independence diplomacy, economic ties, and the evolution of colonial legacies and multilateral frameworks, shaped relations between the United Kingdom and African countries (Cooper, 2018). In West Africa, there is a significant difference between its relationship with Anglophone states, where it maintains a form of colonial control, and with Francophone countries, characterised by diplomatic channels, commercial exchanges, and rivalry with France (Cogneau *et al.* 2018, p. 6). From 1960 to 1990, the United Kingdom maintained a distance from Francophone West African states, providing limited aid, investment, and trade, and focused on Commonwealth Anglophone states due to Cold War priorities. Even in its former colonies, the relationship was limited because each government inherited the British colonial mindset that saw Africa “as a source of trouble rather than opportunity” (Chapham, 1996, p. 88). With the ethical foreign policy developed by Tony Blair during his premiership, Britain sought to prioritise its relationship with Africa. At the Labour Party Conference in 2001, Blair declared that: “The state of Africa is a scar on the conscience of the world. But if the world as a community focused on it, we could heal it. And if we don’t, it will become deeper and angrier” (Monbiot, 2003, p. 16). In 2016, Theresa May introduced the concept of ‘Global Britain’ as the United Kingdom's post-Brexit foreign policy, aiming to extend its influence beyond Anglophone Commonwealth countries. Thus, she developed cooperation with Francophone West African countries to counter the expansion of Jihadists and increase the United Kingdom's investment (May, 2018).

The paper is divided into five main sections. The first reviews the literature and establishes the methodological and theoretical framework, while the second traces the evolution of the UK’s commitment to Francophone West African countries from after Blair’s premiership through the post-Brexit global Britain agenda. The third analyses the UK’s security policies in the Sahel, focusing on counterterrorism cooperation and strategic reorientation, and the fourth examines the economic and diplomatic aspects of the relationship, including trade, investment, and development initiatives. The Fifth and final section discusses the main challenges facing British engagement, including growing great-power competition and concerns about the effectiveness and sustainability of UK aid and investment.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have examined the relationship between the United Kingdom and Francophone West African countries through various lenses: postcolonial reorientation, security cooperation, and the political economy in post-Cold War and post-Brexit contexts. Porteous (2005) studied this relationship during Tony Blair's premiership. A period of the United Kingdom's shift from traditional *realpolitik* to an ethical foreign policy that prioritised human rights, humanitarian intervention, and moral imperatives over material interests. Whereas Dyson explains this change in terms of Blair's black-and-white worldview and presidential style (Dyson 2009, p. 35), Gallagher highlights its implementation on the Africa continent (Gallagher 2013, pp. 25-35). She characterised the change in relationships between the UK and West Africa as a 'force of good' focused on conflict management, peacekeeping, and development, exemplified by the 2000 United Kingdom military engagement in Sierra Leone, which was praised as a success story in humanitarian intervention and in establishing stability. This doctrine laid the groundwork for the UK's engagement in West Africa. For Chafer (2013, p. 245-252) and Ziemke-Dickens (2016, p. 185-191), the principles of ethical foreign policy continued to influence the UK's foreign policy after Blair's premiership.

Following the expansion of the Sahel crisis after Mali's military coup on March 22, 2012, David Cameron supported the French Serval Operation with logistics, training for armed forces, and conflict-prevention funding. Akinola & Ramontja (2023, pp. 131-136) report that in the United Kingdom, the government, to tackle jihadist threats and illegal immigration, aligned with the European Union's 'pivot to the Sahel' in 2018. This strategy involved allocating more resources to Sahel countries, such as Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania, to address terrorism, provide humanitarian aid, and support development. This initiative aimed to address the causes of instability. Olech (2023, p. 56) and Stoicescu (2020, pp. 4-6) highlight the United Kingdom's contribution to France's Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA in Mali. It deployed three Chinook helicopters and approximately 100 personnel for logistics and troop transport. The personnel also contributed to training the G5 Sahel forces.

According to Vines, the UK strengthened its presence in the Sahel in 2018 by establishing new embassies in Chad, Niger, and Mali to enhance cooperation on migration, poverty, and conflict (Vines, 2019, p. 27). Petrikova and Lazell analyse the UK's financial aid commitments in Francophone West African states (Petrikova & Lazell, 2022, p. 10). Between 2015 and 2019, it provided £50 million for climate change resilience and £30 million to support education. The Department of International Trade, known as DIT, focuses on trade relations

between the UK and Francophone West African countries through bilateral and multilateral agreements, such as the Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with Senegal, the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with Côte d'Ivoire for market access, and the West and Central Africa Trade and Investment Forum (WCAF) to strengthen commercial ties with the region (DIT 2020, pp. 5-8).

While the literature on the United Kingdom's foreign policy in Africa is extensive, a gap remains, particularly regarding its relationship with Francophone countries in West Africa. Although these works present pertinent analyses, they focus primarily on specific areas rather than addressing the UK's diplomatic, economic, and strategic relations with Francophone West African countries. In addition, the implications of post-Brexit foreign policy initiatives, particularly the 'Global Britain', are downplayed in the context of West Africa. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the evolution of the United Kingdom's engagement with Francophone West African states between 2015 and 2025, and asks: how has the UK adapted its foreign policy to foster relations with Francophone West African countries since 2015, balancing security imperatives with post-Brexit economic goals?

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The study draws on Role Theory developed by Kalevi Holsti (1970), which helps explain how states define and perform roles in the international system in response to both domestic perceptions and external expectations, while Stephen Walker (1986) and Sebastian Harnisch (2011) focus on role contestation, role conflict, and role change to illustrate the dynamic nature of international relations. In this article, Role Theory is used to interpret the United Kingdom's foreign policy towards Francophone African countries, as it explains the United Kingdom's roles as a partner, security provider, and development actor in countries historically influenced by France. It also highlights British policymakers' adaptation to external expectations, local perceptions, and competition with France as they shape their strategies for commitment, diplomacy, and security cooperation. Qualitative document-based research is used to provide contextual understanding and assess the evolution of the United Kingdom's foreign policy towards Francophone West Africa in the context of post-Brexit strategies and shifting geopolitical dynamics.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: FROM BROWN TO THE GLOBAL BRITAIN

3.1. Brown to Cameron: Aid Peak and Multilateralism

Following Tony Blair's leadership, his successors broadly maintained the same commitment to Africa, but sought to emphasise security and migration management. Thus, from Gordon Brown's premiership to David Cameron's, the UK continued to support development initiatives while responding to new challenges in the Sahel (Chafer, 2013, pp. 245-250). This period illustrates the continuity of the UK's national role conception as a responsible international actor committed to development and stability, with gradual adaptation towards security governance and conflict management. At the beginning of the 2010s, security in this part of Africa gradually deteriorated due to the collapse of state authority in northern Mali and the expansion of terrorist groups. The security conditions raised significant concerns among European leaders, and it became a priority for international security cooperation (Akinola & Ramontja, 2023, pp.131-136). These developments led to external role expectations for European countries to contribute to regional stabilisation. As a response, France led a military intervention called Serval Operation in 2013 to counter terrorist expansion, and the United Kingdom's contribution was limited to logistical support instead of deploying combat troops. This participation illustrated its willingness to contribute to regional security efforts in countries traditionally associated with French influence (Stoicescu, 2020, pp. 3-7).

This choice reflects complementary role performance, in which the UK acted as a supporting security partner rather than leading a military campaign in Francophone countries in the Sahel. Later, this French Operation was merged into Barkhane, with the same objective of countering terrorism. In addition to logistical support for this mission, the United Kingdom supplied intelligence which reflected its belief that instability in the Sahel could menace European security through terrorism, organised crime, and illegal immigration (Olech, 2023, pp. 48-56). This illustrates how a security role conception evolved to include the Sahel within the UK's broader strategic environment. At the multilateral level, it participated in the deployment of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Its contributions included military personnel, logistics, and air support capabilities for these international peacekeeping operations (Stoicescu, 2020, pp. 5-7). This commitment by the UK reflects its preference for multilateralism, which aligns with its self-perception as a cooperative security provider within international institutions. This participation

indicates the interaction between domestic role conceptions – the UK as a role security actor – and international role expectations, particularly from allies and multilateral organisations looking for partners in peacekeeping and counter-terrorism operations.

3.2. From Cameron to Global Britain Shift

During his premiership, David Cameron strengthened ties between the UK and Africa through trade promotion and security cooperation. His foreign policy towards Africa was grounded in development assistance, economic diplomacy, and emerging security concerns. He also emphasised trade and investment, visiting several African countries to position the UK as an essential partner (Whitman, 2016, p. 260; Oliver, 2016, pp. 702-6). As instability in the Sahel intensified, the United Kingdom, working alongside partners such as France, engaged more actively in regional security (Hill, 2019, p. 5). This shift can be interpreted as a progressive adaptation of the UK's foreign policy strategy. Although it continued to consider itself a development partner, it gradually assumed a security provider role in response to growing regional instability.

However, Cameron's African foreign policy was grounded in the broader framework of the European Union's foreign policy. Most of the United Kingdom's initiatives, such as trade relations, development programs, and diplomatic influence, were embedded in the European Union's structures. Thus, during this period, the UK acted as a leading European power rather than a fully autonomous global actor (Whitman, 2016, p. 4-8). This orientation limited its engagement with Francophone West African countries due to France's historical ties and the EU's influence. After Brexit, this configuration changed radically. The UK's decision to leave the European Union presented both an opportunity and a necessity to redefine its international relations strategy. Thus, the concept of 'Global Britain' was developed to help the United Kingdom forge its international policy beyond Europe. Under the leadership of Theresa May, this vision was redirected towards regions such as Africa, where the UK sought to strengthen its diplomatic, economic, and security presence (Daddow, 2019, p. 5-12). This shift from Cameron's foreign policy to 'Global Britain' can be seen as both a continuity and a transformation. Although the UK maintained its involvement in development, trade, and security, Brexit required it to redefine its international role as well as efforts to extend its global presence. Its involvement in the Sahel served as a test of its ambitions and the limits of the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy.

4. SECURITY DIMENSION IN THE SAHEL: UK ENGAGEMENT UNDER ‘GLOBAL BRITAIN’

4.1. Security Corporation and Counterterrorism Strategy

After Brexit, the UK began to play the role of a security provider and stabilisation actor, demonstrating its global policy under the ‘Global Britain’ framework. It participated in multilateral initiatives, particularly through the United Nations in support of MINUSMA, as well as in bilateral partnerships with Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Von Busch & Palmås, 2021, pp. 4-7). This shift reflects a role adaptation in response to evolving threats, including terrorism and regional unrest. For political analysts, the Sahel has become one of the most complex counterterrorism environments, requiring international involvement and coordinated strategies (Duffield, 2023, pp. 2-5). In addition, the persistence and expansion of terrorist groups reveal the limits of purely military approaches and reinforce the need for integrated governance and development responses (Zhu & Gao, 2024, pp. 3-6). This strategy also demonstrates the UK's role convergence, aligning with international partners’ expectations while promoting collective security. Through its instruments, such as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and funding mechanisms like the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, it combines intelligence sharing, capacity-building, and counter-radicalisation efforts. In addition to destroying terrorist networks, the UK’s objective is to strengthen local resilience and prevent recruitment into groups that threaten the region (HM Government, 2023, pp. 4-7). However, these UK initiatives are subject to role contestation due to political instability, a deficit of good governance, and the withdrawal of Western forces from the Sahel. As a result, there is space for alternative actors and local security arrangements that challenge the coherence and legitimacy of external security roles in the Sahel (Inman & Edds-Reitman, 2024, p. 7). This strategy in the Sahel goes beyond security concerns, but it also demonstrates the process by which the UK renegotiates its international identity, strategic priorities, and partnerships in a changing geopolitical context.

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4.2. Strategic Reorientation under the ‘Global Britain’ Agenda

When the ‘Global Britain’ strategy was adopted, the UK redefined its global role by expanding its sphere of influence through diplomatic, security, and development commitments in new regions. In this sense, the Sahel has become a zone where the UK could test its new international relevance and its commitment to global stability. This new approach was formalised through initiatives that combined defence, development, and diplomacy. In 2021,

the Integrated Review was launched to clarify the UK's ambition to be a proactive actor capable of addressing complex international challenges through partnerships and multilateral cooperation. As a result, more resources were directed towards fragile regions such as the Sahel, where instability could directly affect British security and interests (HM Government, 2021: 6-8; Usman & Glennie, 2022, pp. 2-5). The main element to implement this shift was called the 'pivot to the Sahel', which involved a significant increase in the United Kingdom's diplomatic, military, and development commitment towards countries such as Mali, Niger, and Chad to address the symptoms and the root causes of instability, including violent extremism, weak governance, and economic marginalisation, and strengthen alliances with international partners, particularly in the context of post-Brexit geopolitical realignment (Saferworld, 2024).

The expansion of diplomatic missions and the deployment of military forces signal the UK's intention to establish a sustained and visible presence in the Sahel. This development reflects a process of role definition and expansion, as the United Kingdom moves beyond its traditional role as a development partner towards that of a global actor combining security provision, diplomatic engagement, and economic cooperation. This shift is driven not only by domestic ambitions but also by external expectations of the UK's role from allies and multilateral organisations, which call for greater UK involvement in regional stability. Consequently, these actions illustrate role performance by aligning foreign policy behaviour with international responsibilities, reinforcing the UK's post-Brexit identity, and demonstrating its adaptability to evolving security challenges.

5. ECONOMIC AND DIPLOMATIC TIES: ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT (EPA), FORUMS, AND INVESTMENT

5.1. Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) and Trade Continuity

After Brexit, the United Kingdom developed Economic Partnership Agreements to improve its commercial relations with African countries. Previously, these treaties were governed by EU trade agreements. Still, Brexit created an urgent need for the United Kingdom to establish a framework for negotiating accords with African countries to avoid trade disruptions and maintain preferential market access for African exports (Suess, 2019, p. 5). This strategy involved replicating the existing EU-Africa trade accords while maintaining flexibility to adapt them to British interests. It was based on tariff- and quota-free trade for many African exports to the British market and on improving British exports and investment in Africa. In West Africa, trade relations with the UK relied on the 2014 agreement among the EU, ECOWAS, and Mauritania, which faced significant implementation challenges. Therefore, the

UK concluded bilateral agreements with some African countries to ensure the continuity of trade relations after Brexit, aiming to guarantee African exports to the British market (UK Government, 2019, p. 2). For example, the UK-Côte d'Ivoire demonstrated this strategy by maintaining economic relations and strengthening its long-term diplomatic presence in West Africa, focusing on regional integration, sustainable development, investment promotion, and economic cooperation. This showed the United Kingdom's ambition to position itself as a reliable economic partner in the region. As the world's largest cocoa producer, Côte d'Ivoire is part of the United Kingdom's strategic position in its African trade relations (Wilton, 2024; Suess, 2019, p. 5).

For Walker, role contestation occurs when a country seeks to extend its influence into spaces previously dominated by other powers (Walker (1986, pp. 23-52). Thus, the UK's interest in Francophone African countries intersects with France's historical influence, creating a form of geopolitical role competition. Therefore, the United Kingdom's economic-diplomacy offensive in Francophone Africa demonstrates its strategic efforts to reposition itself in these states through international partnerships. According to him, despite structural changes, states try to maintain consistency in their external role. Thus, the EPAs can be viewed as role performance and role continuity. By basing its trade accords on the European Union's trade framework, it demonstrates its role as a liberal trade actor while maintaining its autonomy in trade negotiations. However, EPAs also reflect role constraints and contestation because, while the UK promoted itself as a flexible and reliable economic partner, African countries developed their own regional integration agenda – the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), opposing it sometimes with bilateral trade deals, which creates tensions between external partnership and intra-African economic cooperation.

6. BRITISH INVESTMENT STRATEGIES AND DEVELOPMENT-ORIENTED ENGAGEMENT

The United Kingdom's investment strategies in Francophone West African countries have evolved in response to its political and economic environment. Under 'Global Britain', the UK shifted from ad hoc, aid-anchored commitments to a systematic, development-oriented form of economic diplomacy aimed at reconciling its commercial interests with the global discourse on sustainable growth, infrastructure modernisation, and regional integration (HM Government, 2021, pp. 5-8; UK Government, 2023, pp. 6-9). From 2015 to 2025, the UK used mechanisms such as UK Export Finance (UKEF) guarantees, development-linked infrastructure projects, and blended finance schemes to reduce the risk of private investment in

sectors such as energy, transport, digital connectivity, and agro-industry in countries like Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Benin, Togo, and Burkina Faso (UK Government, 2023.6-9; DIT, 2020:4). For instance, at the end of the 2023-2024 financial year, UKEF supported over £1 billion in transactions in Francophone West and Central Africa, including a £106 million drainage upgrade project in Benin and a £68 million road project in Togo (Ibukum, 2024, pp. 1-2). In the Sahel, security, infrastructure, and climate-resilient projects were developed to address the root causes of political unrest, including marginalisation, unemployment, and environmental degradation (UNDP, 2024, p.13). These projects also essentially focused on road and water point rehabilitation and the restoration of agricultural land to prevent radicalisation and communal violence. For instance, about 150,000 families received cash transfers for their basic needs thanks to the projects (Alliance Sahel, 2023, p. 15).

These mechanisms used by the UK can be understood as performances of the role as a global developmental partner. As the UK combined its ambition to be a competitive investor with its self-conceived identity as a norm-oriented, rules-based actor, its investment in Francophone West Africa was framed in the language of inclusive growth, local value chain integration, and infrastructure, signalling that it did not act solely as a commercial partner but also as a development-oriented one in countries historically under France's influence. The role's performance is also evident in projects implemented that align with African countries' priorities and the UK's post-Brexit ambition to extend its influence. There is also a role contestation and adaptation in this development-oriented commitment, driven by international organisations to which those countries belong and by civil society pressure for respect for local ownership, environmental norms, labour rights, and clear commercial returns. In the context of the growth of anti-Western sentiment in many African countries, the UK's projects are perceived as neocolonial, which challenges its normative role. Thus, the United Kingdom has to readapt its investment strategies by balancing conditionality, transparency, and local partnership. This role adaptation permits the calibration of domestic expectations to external ones. In this sense, the UK's investment strategies in Francophone West Africa from 2015 to 2025 can be interpreted as a contested, evolving performance that mixes economic, security, and normative roles rather than as a shift towards development policy.

7. ANALYSIS AND CHALLENGES: COMPETITION, EFFICACY

7.1. Great Power Competition

After the military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the new authorities demanded the departure of Western troops involved in regional security operations, which created a

strategic vacuum that Russia filled by deploying its Wagner Group as an alternative model of security partnership for the new regimes (Crikemans, 2024, pp. 4-7). This shift represented a direct challenge to the UK's performance of its role as a global development partner in the Sahel. As these military governments considered Wagner an alternative model for security partnerships, the UK struggled to maintain its influence and advance its development and governance objectives in the region (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2022, pp. 5-8; Royal United Services Institute, 2023, pp. 10-14). In addition, this Russian influence complicated its partnership with its key ally in the region because of anti-French sentiment and the withdrawal of its military forces (Guiffard, 2023, pp. 6-9). As a result, the evolving security landscape intensified geopolitical competition and constrained the UK's ability to pursue its strategic, developmental, and diplomatic objectives in the region. Thus, its 'Sahel pivot', aimed at delivering development impact, addressing long-term security threats to its interests, and supporting alliances with international partners, was challenged by fierce competition. Consequently, the pivot led to the expansion of the UK's diplomatic presence in the region, but the economic shocks from COVID-19 and Brexit further limited its ability to compete with Russia in the region (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2022, pp. 6-9; Office for National Statistics, 2021, pp. 3-6).

Another challenge was China's economic diplomacy and infrastructure investment in Africa (Brautigan, 2023:5). In response, the UK adopted a new approach centered on investment, trade, climate action, and long-term partnerships by maintaining its partnership with the African Development Bank to mobilise private investment for development (African Development Bank Group & UK Government, 2026, pp. 3-6). Its investment institutions, such as British International Investment and UK Export Finance, also supported African businesses, local capital markets, and private-sector growth (Mortty & Balogun, 2026, pp. 4-8). However, these efforts were hampered by the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, which offered large-scale infrastructure and alternatives to Western conditionality (Hurley *et al.*, 2018).

The partnership between the European Union and Africa also posed a challenge for the UK because it had been strengthened by increased authority, autonomy, and internal cohesion. This shift has affected the UK's post-Brexit engagement in Africa; the UK had to navigate a complex environment marked by both competition and collaboration with the European Union, even as it sought to establish an independent role, because coordination with the EU remains important to address development and security issues in the region (Ayadi & Ronco, 2023).

7.2. Efficacy Challenges: Investment, Aid, and Measurement Problems

The United Kingdom's new approach to Africa involved shifting its traditional aid to investment partnerships with countries, which affected the efficacy of its role as a global partner. Through its development financial institution, the British International Investment, it invested £9 billion to mitigate climate change and increase climate resilience (British International Investment, 2022). The efficacy challenge stemmed from the contradiction between development impact and commercial returns. Despite its pertinence, this investment failed to reach the poorest populations or address the most challenging development problems because its objective was not commercial but rather to serve as a development partner in countries historically under French influence. However, the sectors in which the United Kingdom invested were difficult to measure in terms of their development impact because it did not address immediate humanitarian needs (Chafer, 2013, pp. 245-253; Suess, 2019, p. 5). These efficacy challenges were illustrated through its development cooperation with countries. For instance, the United Kingdom's development priorities included stability, conflict resolution, response to humanitarian needs, reduction of social inequality, building climate change resilience to accelerate human development and sustainable growth. Through aid and humanitarian programmes, the United Kingdom impacted the lives of 1.4 million people in Chad, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. Over four years, the promotion of equitable and inclusive land and water governance and justice outcomes for marginalised communities (FCDO, 2025, pp. 2-3).

However, these programs faced significant operational challenges because, according to the World Bank, creating about 50,000 jobs per week was necessary to absorb Africa's growing youth population (Fimer & Fox, 2014, pp. 1-3); therefore, the UK's investment approach remained insufficient to meet this huge need. For Chapman, African countries expressed willingness for a respectful, long-term partnership with significant improvement in people's lives, reflecting role recognition problems stemming from the divergence between African perceptions and the UK's self-conception (Chapman, 2025, pp. 8-12). Thus, the United Kingdom should address structural issues such as corruption and institutional deficiencies that led to demands for the Wagner Group's services in some countries, because this search for alternative security partners was not due to immediate security needs but to dissatisfaction with existing international partnerships and the perceived inability of Western actors to respond effectively to local needs (Rynn & Cockayne, 2023, p. 8). Thus, the UK, as well as other Western partners, should address these challenges to provide adequate support.

CONCLUSION

Through the lens of Role Theory, the study of the UK's relationship with Francophone West African countries from 2015 to 2025 highlights the limits and ambitions of its post-Brexit foreign policy. The UK has positioned itself as a global development partner, focusing on economic development, security cooperation, democratic governance, and sustainable investment. However, implementing this role has been hindered by persistent role incongruence, role conflict, and role strain. By positioning itself as a rules-based and development actor, the United Kingdom's policy of extending trade and investment creates tensions with its normative commitments to democracy, good governance, and human rights. The work also demonstrates that the success of this role depends on its conception and external recognition, because perceptions of the UK's actions in Francophone West African countries were shaped by their historical ties to France, local dynamics, and competition with other powers in the region. Thus, the main challenge is to differentiate its actions from those of other Western countries to gain greater visibility.

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