Africa Programme Summary

UK-Africa Relations: Reflections on the Role of African Diplomacy in London

Speaker: HE Professor Kwaku Danso-Boafo
High Commissioner for Ghana to the United Kingdom

Chair: Alex Vines OBE
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INTRODUCTION

This document provides a summary of a meeting and Q&A session held at Chatham House on 13 January 2014 which focused on the role of African diplomacy in London.

Rapid economic growth and more widespread political stability have catalysed increased international engagement with Africa in the past decade, as African states develop more significant roles in the global economy and political cooperation in geopolitics. Accompanying this is a shift in British engagement with African states from an emphasis on development aid to a focus on trade and political cooperation.

Both the meeting and the Q&A session were held on the record and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-mémoire for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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HE PROFESSOR KWAKU DANSO-BOAFO

The speaker stated that the views expressed were his own and not those of the Ghanaian government. He then explained that he wished to centre his discussion on six topics: the history of UK - Africa relations, the role played by diplomacy in state-building, the question of the Commonwealth, global issues, conflict and terrorism, and challenges for the future.

Relations between the United Kingdom and Africa date back over 100 years and have had a major impact on many African states. This shared history has meant that the relationship has been kept alive, primarily through excellent person-to-person bonds. In 2011, the UK opened new embassies in Madagascar, Somalia and South Sudan. The current coalition government, despite increasing domestic austerity, has increased its diplomatic presence on the African continent.

Professor Danso-Boafo highlighted the extensive investment of UK firms in Ghana. Prominent examples include Unilever and Cadbury, with the latter sourcing approximately 70 per cent of its cocoa from the country, and Tullow Oil, currently exploring for oil in Ghana.

Ghana, along with other African countries, has recently welcome dignitaries from the UK government including Foreign Secretary William Hague. The Lord Mayor of London visited Ghana in 2013, and Justine Greening from the Department for International Development (DFID) is due to visit soon. The speaker stated that the UK is an important partner for prosperity in Africa, with Ghana, Angola, Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire entering new partnerships with Westminster that are based on their economic development.

Professor Danso-Boafo said that, as High Commissioner since 2009, he has focused his attention on trade and development through economic diplomacy. Ghana is actively seeking investment and is keen to modernize the economy. The High Commission regularly engages with the business community in Africa, and meets with parliament in order to further discuss economic needs. The speaker noted the recent decision of Africa Invest to become the primary sponsor of Sunderland Football Club.

Trade between the UK and Ghana has been very vibrant - increasing from £466 million in 2008 to £746 million in 2012. Exports to the UK have also grown significantly, although a trade surplus in favour of the UK still exists. The UK remains a very important source of foreign direct investment (FDI) for Ghana, with the total value of UK investment in Ghana amounting to £3.3 billion as of September 2013.
Professor Danso-Boafo stated that UK investment in Ghana covers all sectors of the economy including energy, telecommunications, oil, banking and the timber industry. The impact, however, remains limited. The UK should provide a stronger platform and mechanisms for Ghanaian growth. While DFID has generously given Ghana a lot of financial support in terms of healthcare he was concerned that UK companies were taking many of Ghana’s healthcare professionals.

Piracy and drug trafficking are both prominent issues but Ghana and the UK work together by sharing expertise and information. In this respect, the relationship is quite successful. Ghana’s police have benefitted from the support and training offered by the UK’s Metropolitan Police, and the Royal Navy has also helped Ghana to create a maritime police force.

The speaker highlighted the fact that Ghana was the first African country to become a member of the Commonwealth. It has always been a strong and active member of the organization, which has been important in enabling Ghana’s voice to be projected on the international stage. Ghana wishes to continue playing an active role in the Commonwealth.

Professor Danso-Boafo expressed his belief that there is a need for a different type of relationship between the developed and developing world. With regard to aid, there needs to be a shift of emphasis from assistance to development and investment. Africa has vast natural resources, yet only a small fraction of its land is currently exploited. African countries should become self-sufficient and in order for this to come about, the developed countries should offer their expertise in various sectors. Only through self-sufficiency can the cycle of poverty be broken.

Global warming and climate change are both huge potential threats to Africa. The continent emits the smallest amount of greenhouse gases, yet feels the effects more than any other continent. The speaker stressed the need for collaboration between the UK and African countries on this matter.

According to Professor Danso-Boafo, the prominence of groups such as Boko Haram and al Shabaab are stark reminders that Africa has become a hideout for terrorist groups. African countries, however, have limited capacity to deal with this global problem and need support in terms of intelligence-gathering. The developed countries should also support Africa with capacity-building in conflict prevention and resolution. The on-going crises in South Sudan, Somalia and the Central African Republic are evidence of this need.
Professor Danso-Boafo concluded by highlighting the main challenges in UK-Africa diplomatic relations in London. There is a need to remove air passenger duty which is too expensive and significantly hinders African businessmen travelling to the UK. Congestion charges add to the already high cost of diplomacy and business in London. There is also a lack of affordable VIP facilities at London’s airports. African diplomats find it difficult to get access to UK officials, and visa requirements are too strict. Finally, Ghana wishes for the UK’s support in setting up a database in order for the country to be able to tap into the extensive diaspora network in the UK.
SUMMARY OF Q&A

Questions
Does the speaker believe that Ghana should begin looking towards Asia for investment or should it remain close to the UK?

How does the speaker feel about the fact that African countries seem to be moving at different speeds, with Ghana and a select few moving away from the majority? Can countries like Ghana help the poorer African states to develop more rapidly?

Professor Danso-Boafo
While the UK should remain a priority for historical reasons, it is important that Ghana also looks elsewhere for partners. Ghana looks neither east nor west, it looks forward. It seeks to develop and is open to mutually beneficial trade with all potential international partners. It is important to stress, however, that the UK - Ghana relationship is special and has many advantages.

Ghana wishes that all countries could develop at the same pace but unfortunately this has never been the case. Accra has never hesitated to help its African neighbours; the country has always been open and welcoming and seeks collaboration with its regional partners. While it is Ghana's wish for the entire continent to be free from conflict, in an increasingly interconnected world everything has an impact. African countries need to pool their resources as a means of preventing conflict.

Comment
Hopefully African countries will encompass a common market by 2017 in order to alleviate some of these issues concerning development. Economic convergence is very important and will have a positive impact on all of Africa, from Cairo to Cape Town.

Questions
Many African diplomats in London claim that obtaining visas can be a significant hindrance to business; do Ghanaian diplomats bring up this subject with their British counterparts?

Would the African continent benefit from opening a media centre in London? There is a need for a prominent African voice in the UK; Chatham House and
the BBC are helpful in this respect, yet there is a need for something bigger to project the African voice in this country. The speaker, as a result of his high standing, could ask the African Union to look into such measures.

Comment
Politics can often get in the way of trade. For example, sanctions imposed on Sudan by the United States have meant that Khartoum has had to turn east towards China. However, the current UK government has been gracious in terms of sanctions and UK - Sudan is currently growing.

Professor Danso-Boafo
With regard to bringing up our concerns with our British counterparts, Ghana utilizes the normal diplomatic channels. It is an on-going discussion between both parties and it is important for the restrictions to be loosened.

Trade is a concern. Regional African trade needs to rise exponentially. It is striking that it is usually faster and more affordable to travel to Europe than to other parts of Africa. Integration is necessary.

With regard to the need for an African voice in the British media, I have very little influence in order to make such a thing happen. However, there is certainly capacity for a pan-African media outlet.

Questions
Is Ghana’s current fiscal deficit likely to impede economic progress? How can Ghana reassure foreign investors?

There has been recent speculation that ECOWAS was intending to implement an identity card system based on mobile phone technology. Has there been any progress in this regard?

Is the Ghanaian diaspora beginning to influence domestic politics in the UK? Are the African politicians in the UK of any benefit to you?

Professor Danso-Boafo
The deficit has become an impediment in some areas. Ghana has massive infrastructural development needs. Once these needs are attended to, hopefully the economy will improve significantly and the deficit will be reduced. Ghana also has strong youth employment policies. The president’s
state of the nation address in the coming weeks will explain the government’s strategy on tackling the deficit.

There is still no confirmation of a go-ahead for the identity card proposal. In my opinion, the scheme would be of significant benefit to the region.

African politicians in the UK are of great assistance; they are able to open doors that were previously closed. It is important that Ghana takes full advantage of their presence.