



Taking back control of foreign aid? National interest and the conservative reframings of UK development policy

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Abstract

The paper explores the national interest turn in the rhetoric associated with UK foreign aid policy under Conservative governments between 2016 and 2024. The ‘national interest’ has figured prominently in the literature on donor motivations for aid, which has shown how different interpretations of the concept may co-exist, and undermine each other through their impacts on aid allocation and effectiveness. The paper identifies three framings of the national interest put forward by Conservative governments: An ‘enlightened’ narrative relatively aligned with global poverty reduction; one focused on enhancing British leadership and influence by ‘taking back control’; and the final narrative emphasising trade, investments, and UK job creation. The three narratives represent policy progression between successive Conservative governments, who were constantly faced with the need to adapt their messaging on aid to changing political circumstances. However, this constant reframing of the national interest around foreign aid led to significant ambiguity. Furthermore, the latter two narratives and their implementation (such as the merger between the Foreign Office and DFID) carried a number of inconsistencies, partially undermining the national interest which they claimed to serve.

Keywords Foreign aid · National interest · Conservative government FCDO

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Introduction

The UK's post-2010 Conservative governments (both the Conservative-led coalition to 2015 and then the Conservative governments between 2015 and 2024) maintained relatively high levels of spending on official development assistance (ODA), despite wide-ranging opposition from their constituents and some of their own MPs. This was justified by the governments' increasingly explicit stance that aid serves 'the national interest', as seen by the title of the 2015 aid strategy *UK aid: Tackling global challenges in the national interest*. This strategy argued that 'aid spending has sometimes been controversial at home, because people want to know that it is squarely in the UK's national interest', and then set out how tackling poverty and addressing global challenges served the national interest (HM Treasury and DFID 2015). The government was implying, sometimes subtly sometimes more blatantly, that aid spending saved Britain money later, as it stopped issues becoming problems and was therefore a good long-term investment for the UK. This rhetoric was later taken further, as exemplified by Penny Mordaunt, Secretary of State for International Development between 2017 and 2019, when she stated that 'the bar we need to set on aid spending is not just "are we spending this money well" but "could we spend it better in the national interest"' (Merrick 2018). The link between Britain's best interests and aid were explicit in the rhetoric used to justify (though rarely explain) ODA spending. The 'national interest' was later redefined and reframed several times in quick succession, leading to different interpretations, inconsistencies and contradictions.

Aid usually serves a multitude of goals, and the history of foreign aid following the Second World War has been characterised by continuous shifts in donor priorities (Hook and Rumsey 2016). The literature generally understands aid serving donor national interests as the prioritisation of projects which promote economic, political or security benefits for the donor, at the expense of the development and poverty reduction needs of the recipients (Mawdsley 2017). Given that the UK has been seen as an 'aid superpower' (Wickstead 2019), what it spends its aid on matters for global development, but also for its reputation and relations with the countries of the Global South.

The aim of this paper therefore is to explore how the UK's Conservative governments framed the 'national interest', how these framings evolved, and what dilemmas they led to. We focus especially on the years following the 2016 Brexit referendum, when the UK was forced to create a new identity for itself as an internationally relevant power outside of the EU, in the context of weak economic performance and successive crises, including a slow-boiling migration crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis. During the period there have been five Conservative Prime Ministers (David Cameron 2010–2016, Theresa May 2016–2019, Boris Johnson 2019–2022, Liz Truss 2022 and Rishi Sunak 2022–2024). While each had a different policy position within the Conservative Party, and different issues to deal with during their time in office, other than Truss all were committed to spending 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) on ODA for at least part of their time in office (Boris Johnson reduced



ODA spending to 0.5% in 2020).¹ This commitment to high levels of aid spending across all governments highlights a degree of continuity and the fact that Conservative leaders, as opposed to many of their constituents, clearly saw value in aid and in the UK's role as a major provider of it. How they justified this commitment to their aid-sceptic voters and the broader British public, and how these justifications shifted to suit different circumstances, is a question which requires detailed analysis.

Building on the analysis of government documents, strategies and speeches produced since 2015, combined with a detailed review of the existing literature, we show that during the last eight years of Conservative rule, the 'national interest' was (re)conceptualised in at least three times. The national interest was first framed in an 'enlightened' narrative relatively aligned with global poverty reduction; this was followed by one focused on enhancing British leadership and influence by 'taking back control'; and the final narrative emphasised trade, investments and UK job creation. Implementing these framings led to a massive diversion (and later overall reduction) of aid away from poverty reduction and initiatives focused on tackling global challenges towards more short-term, electorally motivated goals around managing migration and supporting British businesses. In other words, by 2024, UK aid spending 'in the national interest' looked very different than what the 2015 aid strategy foresaw, also framed at the time as 'in the national interest'. These frequent redefinitions of the national interest, and various tensions within each framing led to an inconsistent and haphazard UK aid policy under the years of Conservative governments.

There has been significant academic interest recently in the UK's foreign aid policy, focusing especially on how priorities changed after the Brexit referendum and cuts to the ODA budget (see, among others, Crines and Heppell 2017; Mawdsley 2017; Clarke 2018; Honeyman 2019; Wickstead 2019; Dawar 2023; Melvin 2023; Morley and Silver 2023; Peck 2023; Langan 2024; Lazell 2024; Lazell and Petrikova 2024, 2025; Lowcock and Dissanayake 2024). This paper provides a significant addition to this literature by embedding the discussion of UK aid into the broader literature on donor interests and using insights from this body of work to analyse the trade-offs and implications caused by different interpretations of the national interest. While Feeny et al. (2019) have also used the donor interests literature, their focus is more narrow as they explain only the allocation of UK ODA.

Understanding how framings of the national interest, and thus the UK's motivations for giving ODA, have shifted, has two important broader implications. First, it matters how governments frame the underlying reasons of policy choices to the public. While these framings are meant to shore up support for the policy and more broadly the government, they also have the side effect of shaping public perceptions

¹ Rishi Sunak was Chief Secretary to the Treasury between 2019 and 2020 before becoming Chancellor so, as a member of the government, he was bound by their policies which included their commitment to 0.7% ODA funding. It could easily be argued that he was not personally a supporter of that policy, but it was a policy when he was elected as an MP in 2015 and when he was serving in government. A similar argument could be made for Truss as she too was an MP and a serving member of the government, including as Foreign Secretary overseeing foreign aid, during the time period.



on the policy itself. If aid to developing countries is presented to the public as a purely transactional relationship where the donor needs to be able to reap short-term gains, it will erode a sense of public solidarity towards those less fortunate and the need to give altruistically. Such framings may therefore have an impact on how people see charitable giving for overseas causes and thus how willing they are to contribute their time and money to them. Second, while framings of the national interest in aid have clearly been meant for domestic audiences, they are closely watched by partner country governments. These governments of course likely had few illusions about the motivations of donors, but emphasising donor self-interest so blatantly will have consequences on Britain's ability to wield soft power.

The paper is structured as follows: The following section discusses the debate around national interest in the literature on foreign aid, which is followed by a brief overview of the key policy decisions taken in the development policy space in the UK. This section highlights the move away from poverty reduction towards the national interest narrative. The paper then analyses what the various Conservative governments understood as the national interest using three distinct framings. Finally, we show how these three framings of aid in the national interest carry several implications when implemented in the practice of UK ODA, leading to various inconsistencies and challenges. The final section offers brief conclusions.

The national interest debate in aid policy

Research on why donors engage in foreign aid spending has a long history (Hook 1995). The classic approach generally identifies three main groups of motivations: The 'national interest' of the donor (often framed as 'selfish' motivations); the needs of the recipients (often termed 'altruistic'); and recipient merit, or the need to reward recipients for good performance (Alesina and Dollar 2000; Hoeffler and Outram 2011; Bartlett 2021). Selfish motivations have generally been seen to include the need to gain or maintain political influence, build alliances, spread ideology, or increase exports and access to raw materials; while altruistic motivations would lead to forms of aid which focus on reducing poverty, empowering the poor or transferring funds with very few 'strings attached'. When allocating aid based on recipient merit, donors may provide more aid to well-governed countries with low levels of corruption and strong institutions (McGillivray and Pham 2017), with the understanding that it will be spent more responsibly and effectively, although that is never a certainty.

However, as many have pointed out, these groups of motivations can considerably overlap. Van der Veen (2011) for example shows how aid can serve different interests almost simultaneously. Donor interests for giving aid may coincide with the needs of recipients, for example in terms of reducing the spread of infectious diseases, strengthening fragile states, climate change mitigation or, more broadly, combating spillovers caused by underdevelopment (Bermeo 2017). Rewarding well performing and well-governed countries with more aid can lead to greater aid effectiveness in reducing poverty, and can also help consolidate competent governments, leading to greater regional stability and a reduction of security threats for the donor.



These broad motivations for giving aid are no doubt present in most aid allocation decisions of donors, and the balance between them has varied among different donor countries as well as over time (Maizels and Nissanke 1984: 880). National interest has always been present in aid, but there has been variance in the strength of its articulation and instrumental pursuit (Gulrajani 2017). The multitude of motivations for providing aid and the considerable overlaps between them therefore mean that what matters is how governments frame and communicate their reasons for providing aid, and specifically in our case, how much they choose to emphasise or downplay the 'national interest' in this rhetoric.

A clear challenge is to define what the 'national interest' of a country actually is. We do not aim to reopen this debate here, which goes to the heart of international relations theory, and different paradigms in the discipline will have different understandings of what it is and how it is shaped (Morgenthau 1949; Finnemore 1996; Weldes 1996). As stated by Roskin (1994), 'if the definition of the national interest can be warped in so many ways, what good is the concept?' Instead of engaging with these theoretical debates, we rather adopt an approach which takes what the government says is the national interest at face value. We assume that this rhetoric is in line with their motivations and goals, depending on who their rhetorical messages are directed at. If a government is using this rhetoric repeatedly or in a sustained way, it not only indicates what they believe the priorities of the voters are but also suggests that they believe it is effective. As Edmunds et al. (2014: 504) note, 'analytically, the notion of a national interest or interests provides us with a measure against which foreign policy actions taken in the name of the political community can be evaluated and critiqued'. Furthermore, they argue that 'the manner in which particular notions of the national interest become dominant is key to understanding which interests are seen as important and why' (Edmunds et al. 2014: 506).

Governments have used references to the 'national interest' to justify a wide variety of aid spending, modalities and allocation. Claims that aid serves national interests are nothing new in political discourses, however, they do seem to have become more pervasive among donors since the early 2010s (Mawdsley 2017). Recently, donors have used arguments around national interest to justify aid spending for conflict management, security and stabilisation purposes (Swiss 2012; Lazell and Petrikova 2024), the increased involvement of the (donor's) private sector in aid and the use of aid to tackle migration (Rozbicka and Szent-Iványi 2020). Combating security threats, creating jobs in the donor state and reducing migration are all topics that are at the forefront of voters' concerns, and therefore decision makers may feel they need to frame aid policy in a way that speaks to these. This framing is often couched in a language that aid can work in the mutual interests of the donor and the partner, which Mawdsley (2017) labels the 'win-win' projection. Interestingly, the use of the term 'national interest' tells us that overseas spending, even when it might be considered objectively to be a 'good thing' is only justifiable, in the minds of the government, if it benefits the people of the donor country in some way. A 'good' deed in and of itself is not enough. It must serve the taxpayer in the short term to make it appropriate and justifiable.

This narrative, however, reflects a relatively short-term perspective, where benefits are expected to come quickly and long-term investment is often considered undesirable.



It often overlooks all aspects of colonialism and relies instead upon arguments relating to corruption and the perceived over-dependence of developing countries on charity or ‘hand-outs’ (for example, Martin 2016). Many governments have neglected to talk about how aid can serve the national interest in the long term, for example by making poor countries more prosperous and well governed (Barder 2018; Greenhill 2018). In fact, realignments in the motivations for providing aid have often happened at the expense of more ‘altruistically’ focused aid aimed at issues related to poverty reduction, like funding for women’s rights and gender equality (Swiss 2012), exactly the kind of assistance that is only likely to have impacts on the long term. Many observers also agree that pursuing short-term national interest when also (nominally) aiming to reduce poverty ‘comes at significant cost to effectiveness’ (Barder 2018) or is ‘bad value for money’ (Buschmann 2018).

The national interest concept also links to government ideology (Lancaster 2007; Tingley 2010). While the role of this in aid has been relatively under-studied, there are findings that suggest that aid tends to decline under conservative governments (Tingley 2010). Right-leaning governments are often ideologically opposed to state intervention that comes with aid and thus sceptical of its ability to do good especially in badly governed countries (Thérien 2002), ‘indifferent’ towards the poorest countries (Black 2012) or have to contend with greater resistance to aid in the party ranks (Crines and Heppell 2017). There is also evidence that right-wing governments tend to focus more on the economic interests of their constituents and the geopolitical interests of the state, as opposed to left-wing ones which emphasise poverty reduction (Allen and Flynn 2018). Conversely, aid volumes generally tend to increase under long spells of social democratic government, and are also linked positively to domestic social spending (Thérien and Noël 2000). Bureaucratic actors in foreign aid can also play a role in maintaining the focus of development aid on poverty reduction (Arel-Bundock et al. 2015; Gularjani 2017). It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that the increased focus on national interest has been accompanied by changes in the organisation of aid agencies within many donor states. Development policy goals have repeatedly been marginalised in an attempt to align development and foreign policy aims, often meaning overseas business priorities have been given precedence. In particular, development ministries/agencies have been subsumed within wider foreign policy governance, most commonly under conservative government, such as in Canada, Australia and the UK (Day 2016; Brown 2023).

Given all the ways in which aid can serve the ‘national interest’, it is crucial to understand how exactly Conservative UK governments have framed it. We focus on their domestic messaging as we maintain that governments will be keener to emphasise national interest there than in rhetoric aimed at international audiences. First, however, we provide a short overview of the UK’s recent foreign aid history.

UK aid policy after 2015

Between 1997 and 2020, the Department for International Development (DFID) served as the UK’s main aid policy maker and implementing agency. The underlying mission of the various incarnations of DFID has been the ‘reduction of poverty in



the poorest countries' (Ireton 2013), representing 'the "moral wing" of the government by its separation from the more "political" agenda of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)' (Połowska-Kimunguyi and Kimunguyi 2017). This was especially visible during the New Labour years (Morrissey 2005; Honeyman 2019) and appeared to continue with the Conservative/Liberal Democratic coalition after 2010 (Heppell and Lightfoot 2012). This coalition took the unusual step of raising ODA spending to 0.7% of GNI and enshrined this target in law in 2015. This happened despite austerity and budget cuts across government departments, with DFID being one of the few departments exempted.

Unsurprisingly, this 'rise in UK ODA has increased the politicisation of foreign aid in the UK' (Feeny et al. 2019: 512). As the increase in aid came at a time of austerity in many other policy areas, domestic hostility towards it increased (Mawdsley 2017), signalling a 'disconnect' between government policy and the general public opinion (Clements 2019, 159–60). Conservative-leaning newspapers, through their general negative coverage of aid, have made a significant portion of the electorate more susceptible to arguments against it aid across all ideological segments (Bayram et al. 2024). These voices were echoed by many backbenchers in the Conservative Party, and also in the UK Independence Party (UKIP), who officially argued that 'charity begins at home' (Crines and Heppell 2017). UKIP polled at 25% in late 2014 (Euractive 2014) and received more than 12% of the vote in 2015, signifying a major electoral threat to the Conservative Party. This hostility towards aid from the right-wing press, parts of the Conservative Party, electoral challengers on the populist right and increasingly the broader public remained a constant source of pressure on Conservative governments later on as well.

The backlash forced the government on the defensive and to adapt its public messaging to justify high levels of aid spending. Initially, the coalition government emphasised increasing the effectiveness ('value for money') and accountability of aid: 'maintaining public support for our aid programme will require a much greater focus on performance, results and outcomes' (Noxolo 2012). The end of the coalition government in 2015, however, saw an explicit change in focus. The 2015 aid strategy, entitled *UK aid: Tackling global challenges in the national interest* (HM Treasury and DFID 2015) set out a clear conservative vision for development, apparent already in the document's title. According to the strategy document, 'Britain [...] not only meets its responsibilities to the world's poorest, but in doing so best serves and protects its own security and interests'. The strategy signalled a break with the past focus on tackling poverty (Petrikova and Lazell 2022) by explicitly stating that UK aid must be spent in the national interest (Lazell 2024: 722), focusing on goals like improving the business climate, competitiveness and the operation of markets, reforming the energy and financial sectors, and increasing the ability of governments to tackle corruption (Lowcock and Dissanayake 2024).

The shift towards a greater emphasis on the national interest was accelerated by the Brexit vote. Increasing divisions and factional politics within the Conservative Party had a significant impact on post-Brexit foreign policy (Martill 2023). Heavily pro-Brexit, traditionally conservative and aid-sceptic factions in the party became dominant in 2019 when Boris Johnson became Prime Minister. Under his premiership, the FCO and DFID were merged to form the Foreign, Commonwealth



and Development Office (FCDO) in 2020, seen to have been driven by the need to link UK aid and national interest more closely (Lazell and Petrikova 2024). Johnson stated that ‘this is exactly the moment when we must mobilise every one of our national assets, including our aid budget and expertise, to safeguard British interests and values overseas’ (Gov.uk 2020). The closer links between foreign, defence and development policy, and how their overarching aim is to ‘protect and promote the interests of the British people’ were also emphasised in *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, the Johnson government’s signature foreign policy strategy. The report was explicit in arguing that all aspects of UK foreign policy needed to be reformulated to serve Britain’s national interest directly (Wraight and Green 2025).

The Integrated Review was followed by a new aid strategy, simply titled *The UK’s 2022 aid strategy* (FCDO 2022). This document continued the rhetoric around national interest, augmenting it with the need to use development ‘as a vehicle for promoting the perceived benefits of increased national sovereignty’ (Peck 2023). It also highlighted a shift towards greater bilateral spending at the expense of contributions to multilateral agencies, signalling the desire for greater strategic control over how ‘taxpayer’s money’ is spent to support UK priorities (FCDO 2022: 22; Worley 2022). Furthermore, it emphasised delivering investment, support for women and girls, the provision of humanitarian assistance, combatting climate change and global health as priorities (FCDO 2022).

Despite the significant institutional and policy changes, the UK government argued that maintaining the 0.7% spending on aid had become untenable due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the narrative of fiscal responsibility, in 2020 the Johnson government announced a (temporary) reduction in the aid budget to 0.5%, resulting in an overall reduction of around 30% (Greene and Licht 2024 162). Cuts to the aid budget were enacted with ‘destructive speed and scale’ (Peck 2023). The government has stated that it aims to return to a 0.7% aid/GNI ratio when two fiscal tests are met: On a sustainable basis, the government is not borrowing to finance day-to-day spending, and underlying debt is falling. Given the financial challenges of the period, meeting these tests would be very difficult although not impossible. Importantly, the 0.5% commitment became a hard ceiling that could not be exceeded.

This brief overview of UK aid policy shows how the rhetoric around using aid to promote the national interest became dominant after 2015. In the next sections, we analyse what the various Conservative governments understood as the national interest and the implications of these framings.

National interest according to conservative governments

The various strategic documents outlined above, as well as commentary around them by senior Conservative politicians show many different understandings of the ‘national interest’ between 2015 and 2024, but these can be grouped under three broad and interrelated framings.



The first framing presents ‘national interest’ to be relatively aligned with more ‘traditional’ development goals, albeit with some differences in emphasis. In short, this framing argues that a more prosperous, stable and safe, resilient and less poor world is in the UK’s interest. According to the 2015 aid strategy, aid should be spent on tackling poverty and the ‘great global challenges—from the root causes of mass migration and disease, to the threat of terrorism and global climate change—all of which also directly threaten British interests’ (HM Treasury and DFID 2015: 3). The four goals of the strategy (strengthening global peace, security and governance; strengthening resilience and response to crises; promoting global prosperity; and tackling extreme poverty and helping the world’s most vulnerable, especially women and children) while seemingly altruistic, are framed in ways to show how they benefit Britain. Eliminating poverty advances the UK’s national interests, and once this was achieved, the UK could trade and engage with a more prosperous, peaceful world meaning it could achieve more of its own goals. By spending now, the UK can not only save later but prosper later as well. In a speech to the House of Commons, then Secretary of State for International Development Justine Greening argued that the strategy is ‘both right and smart [...] [as] in responding to the needs of the poorest, we address our own too. That what benefits them, also benefits us’. She also used this speech to provide several examples of how aid directly benefitted the UK in terms of reducing migration or the spread of diseases like Ebola, all while ensuring a ‘a laser-like focus on better results and achieving much greater value for taxpayers’ (Greening 2015). This framing of the national interest corresponds to what the literature has variously labelled ‘enlightened self-interest’ or ‘targeted development’ (Bermeo 2017), where the poverty reduction needs of the recipients aligns with donor interests around the need to decrease negative spillovers from global poverty. The framing even has some commonalities with the previous framings used pre-2010 by the Blair and Brown governments (Honeyman 2019).

This framing became less present in later strategic documents, but elements of it remained across all Conservative governments. The Integrated Review continued to highlight tackling climate change as a key UK interest and committed to aligning all aid to this goal. It also emphasised strengthening resilience, as the ‘the UK’s resilience is intertwined with global resilience’, and while the need to reduce poverty is present in the Integrated Review, it refers to it in instrumental terms as a tool to combat climate change, reduce the spread of diseases, migration, conflict and the loss of biodiversity. The 2022 aid strategy, however, mostly dropped this framing, other than in case of climate change, global health, and women and girls.

The second framing sees aid as serving foreign policy goals more effectively in the post-Brexit period, centred around the slogan of ‘Global Britain’, but also bearing echoes of the Brexit slogan of ‘taking back control’. Under this framing, aid is seen as a tool to project British influence, global leadership and soft power, with the aim of ensuring that the UK remains an international actor of note (Hadfield and Whitman 2023). Interestingly, this framing exists in the shadow of colonialism, although that word is rarely mentioned by the UK when discussing development policy. Indeed, this framing provides a way for UK politicians to create an international identity, at home and abroad, to replace the colonial vision which is often part of the discourse in UK politics. Using this framing, the UK can



create a dual personality for itself internationally—on the one hand it is a friend and ally of the developing nations, but on the other it is still dominant in these relationships. The first identity plays wells globally, the second is for a domestic audience, keen to see the UK as a dominating great power without the strings and immorality of colonialism at its worst. This framing has especially been strong in the Integrated Review, which talks about Britain’s global leadership and seeks to ensure that the country becomes a ‘beacon of democratic sovereignty and one of the most influential countries in the world, tackling the issues that matter most to our citizens through our actions at home and overseas’ (FCDO 2021). Alongside other tools for international influence, aid is seen to have a key role in increasing the UK’s ‘impact as a force for good’. The Integrated Review calls on aid to be focused to ‘those areas which are important to a globally-focused UK’. Climate change, global health, girl’s education, humanitarian support, as well as trade and economic growth are explicitly mentioned as such areas. Combating climate change is therefore not only an important goal in itself, but because UK leadership on it enhances soft power, as shown by ‘historic [British] global leadership at COP26’. Geographically, aid is seen to be an especially key tool for British influence in East Africa and in the Indo-Pacific. This framing aligns with the Network of Liberty initiative, announced by Liz Truss in 2021 during her time as Foreign Secretary. This initiative was aimed at bolstering Britain’s ‘unrivalled’ global influence further by portraying it as a leader of like-minded countries that can shape the international agenda, including promoting freedom and democracy (Truss 2021). Development policy was seen as one of the tools to advance British leadership. This narrative on influence is linked to various (geo) political donor self-interests around maintaining and gaining political influence over other countries. Generally, the literature argues that these donor goals are not closely aligned with the needs of recipients. Nonetheless, this framing does not directly contradict the first one around enlightened self-interest, rather it emphasises Britain’s leadership and soft power in achieving these goals.

The third theme focuses on direct benefits for the UK in terms of jobs at home, exports and investments (Olivie and Perez 2020). While benefits for British businesses are present in the first framing as well in terms of a more prosperous world providing greater opportunities for UK businesses (HM Treasury and DFID 2015: 17), this narrative focuses on more short-term gains. The Integrated Review is especially heavy on references to jobs in the UK (Lowcock and Dissanayake 2024). Although these are mostly mentioned in connection to external policies other than aid, there is a clear sense that aid also has a role to play in ‘creating new foundations for [UK] prosperity’. The 2022 aid strategy represents a further shift through its emphasis on investments, trade and aid to support trade capacities. It argues heavily for promoting private sector investments in developing countries, claiming that these ‘will deliver for people here in the UK—investments abroad will generate export opportunities in the UK, creating jobs right across the country’ (FCDO 2022: 8). It also promises to expand the use of British expertise in aid, harkening back to the 2015 strategy, which set out a ‘whole of government approach to our international development effort, [...] leveraging wider UK expertise through the UK’s world-leading science, research and development base’ (HM Treasury and DFID 2015: 9).



This ‘will create new opportunities for businesses and institutions across all parts of the UK to benefit through access to shared knowledge and expertise’ (FCDO 2022).

This framing demonstrates how the notion of ‘national interest’ had become narrower, both in terms of time and in terms of issue. Firstly, the time frame for self-interest narrowed. Gone were promises of longer-term project support, such as those relating to biodiversity (although combatting climate change did remain) and instead the time frame for action became more short term, more targeted. Secondly, instead of tackling bigger issues, which take longer, cost more but have bigger pay-offs, such as dealing with conflict and poverty which drive migration and terrorism, instead projects were being targeted to bring about smaller wins. While these are often advantageous, they would never bring about widescale change or create the benefits the UK wished to see from its ODA policy. This third framing also links closely with donor motivations around short-term economic benefits, often promoted through tied aid, in terms of increased exports and investments abroad.

Implications

These three framings of aid in the national interest carry several implications when implemented in the practice of UK aid.

When looking at the actions of post-2015 Conservative governments, it is clear that the first framing around ‘enlightened self-interest’ became less prominent relatively quickly. While conceivably many different policy options would fit under this narrative, these would all need to prioritise relatively high levels of aid spending, a focus on poverty reduction and an understanding of aid effectiveness that was aligned with this focus. As discussed, from an institutional point of view, independent aid bureaucracies play a key role in maintaining this ‘development consensus’ and poverty focus in a donor’s policies (Arel-Bundock et al. 2015). DFID fit this bill very well. It was originally set up with poverty alleviation as its *raison d’être*, and was seen as both a good development actor and a strong instrument for the UK’s soft power (Vereker 2020). The budget of DFID has dwarfed the FCO budget since its creation, and had increased substantially after the 0.7% target was enshrined in law (standing in 2019 at £15 billion for DFID and £2.4 billion for the FCO; Honeyman 2020). DFID was increasingly involved in policy debates, and had an influential presence in Cabinet to speak for its priorities (Devanny and Berry 2022: 91). However, the merger of the FCO and DFID, and the reductions in aid spending undermined the credibility of the first framing significantly. This framing could be considered one which only worked in certain conditions. The call to self-interest is an obvious tool in politics, and something most voters or political observers would be familiar with. The ‘enlightened’ element requires voters to feel that they can temporarily invest in something to gain later on. With increasing economic difficulties and a rising cost of living crisis in the UK and elsewhere, this framing had only limited utility, demonstrated by the decline in its usage.

The second framing, focused around aid serving foreign policy goals and promoting British influence, was built on the assumption that the UK government knew, or would know going forward, where aid money should be spent. It replied



upon a paternalistic view of the world where Whitehall would be able to determine which aid projects would benefit the UK, and presumably the developing nation, rather than focusing on what the developing nation needed. By ‘taking back control’, the UK would be able to ensure that its bilateral funds are spent in the partner countries in a way that increase influence. Giving partner countries freedom in how they spend the aid they receive has generally been seen as a way to increase their ownership and thus aid effectiveness (Molenaers 2012). The 2015 strategy promised to end all general budget support, a form of aid which places relatively few constraints on how recipients can spend the funding. The 2022 strategy emphasised ‘doing proportionately more through country and bilateral programmes’ and thus being ‘more consciously geopolitical in approach’. This framing was not only paternalistic in approach but was also creating an image of the UK, to a domestic audience, of superiority, economically and politically. That image was not necessarily one which played well in developing nations, and risked the alienation of the very states the UK was trying to increase its influence with. However, recipient countries often had to ‘toe the line’, avoiding discussion of issues which might be unsettling for the UK government (one example might be David Cameron’s trip to Jamaica in 2015 where the issue of reparations for slavery was dismissed by the UK government (BBC 2015)).

A further implication of this framing was that the government needed to have greater control over how aid was spent, as opposed to other actors, such as autonomous civil servants, multilateral organisations or partner governments. ‘Taking back control’ from all three of these therefore emerged as a key priority. Merging DFID with the FCO to create the FCDO, which in effect meant subordinating development to foreign policy, and potentially subordinating poverty reduction to strategic national policy aims, aimed to create the institutional conditions under which aid could be better used to support geopolitical goals around increasing British influence (Wraight and Green 2025). Many in the Conservative Party saw DFID as having grown too strong, and pursuing policies which were not necessarily aligned with the more geopolitical approach which post-Brexit Britain needed. As Devanny and Berry (2022) highlight, there had been steady increases in the numbers of UK development officials deployed overseas since the late 1990s, whereas the FCO’s diplomatic representation in many countries fell, leading to a situation where DFID became the main UK presence in a number of developing countries, in effect reducing UK relations to those countries to ‘development only’. As PM Johnson highlighted in his speech announcing the merger, ‘we tolerate a risk of our left and right hands working independently’ (Honeyman 2020). With two separate government departments, both acting with different priorities at their heart, the possibility for mixed messaging and conflicting activity was evident. The FCO was seen as in need of reinvigoration after a period of neglect, to enable it to pursue Global Britain’s interests. Johnson argued that this conflict, coupled with an overly generous ODA budget meant that UK aid was a ‘giant cashpoint in the sky’ (Honeyman 2020). This term suggests a very uneven relationship, where the UK gives without any benefit, while the developing world takes with no responsibilities. The deliberate messaging here was clearly



designed to appeal to both Conservative MPs and the 66% of the UK public who wanted to see a cut in ODA spending in 2020 according to YouGov (Smith 2020).

Multilateral organisations were also seen to limit the UK's ability to spend aid for geopolitical purposes. For much of the 2010s, the UK had a relatively low share of bilateral aid in its total aid spending, with around 35–40% of its spending channelled through various multilateral agencies and initiatives as core funding (OECD 2020: 102; FCDO 2024), among them the EU. Multilateral agencies, especially those associated with the UN, are generally seen as more likely to promote recipient interests and focus on poverty reduction, as opposed to donor interests (Gulrajani 2016). Increasingly in the period up to 2016, the EU was viewed by its critics as prioritising the interests of others and therefore any strategic alignment between the UK's interests and the EU's aid distribution was seen as limited. While individual donors would have some control over how their contributions to multilateral organisation are spent, either by attaching conditions to how the organisation can use them (earmarked funding; see Szent-Iványi et al. 2019), or through their presence in the organisations' government bodies, these are relatively indirect means and often involve compromise with the interests of other donors. The 2022 aid strategy promised that the 'FCDO will substantially rebalance its ODA investments from multilateral towards bilateral channels' and increase the bilateral share to 75% by 2025.

Taking back control and aligning aid spending with the need to increase the UK's global influence therefore involved reforms which meant abolishing an independent aid agency which was generally seen as an effective poverty-focused institution, as well as enacting a number of further changes to aid allocation (decreasing aid to multilateral institutions and ending general budget support) which also worked against poverty-focused aid. These changes directly undermine the first narrative, which frames UK interests around reducing the spillovers from global poverty. This change of narrative therefore represents a stark shift: It was a form of communication directly playing to a Brexit audience, reinforcing their existing views on Britain's role in the world and concerns over the dominance of the UK in the world. Aid policy was used as another plank to support the Brexit argument, and as Crines and Heppell (2017) show, there was significant overlap between aid sceptics and Brexit supporters among Conservative backbenchers.

The third framing around using aid to support UK jobs and a whole of government approach aimed to leverage British expertise has two important implications. The first is again a shift in emphasis away from traditional aid programmes aimed at poverty reduction, but instead of focusing on spending that increases British influence (as per the second framing), this one is towards aid that supports the private sector, including trade and investments. According to Mawdsley et al. (2018), these shifts have been visible since the early 2010s, with DFID increasingly emphasising growth and investments. Langan (2024) highlights how the narrative linking aid and trade has grown further in importance within the FCDO since the merger. This emphasis became especially clear with the rebranding of the UK's development finance institution, the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) into British International Investment (BII) in 2022. While CDC faced numerous criticisms and had a patchy track record (Mawdsley et al. 2018), it did have a relatively strong development mandate and a mission to create jobs



in the poorest countries (Dawar 2023). Poverty reduction, however, is not among the BII's four areas of impact, and it has no obligation to work with the FCDO's aid officials, instead it coordinates with UK Export Finance and the Department for International Trade, bodies both aimed at promoting UK trade interests (Dawar 2023). Private sector investments are generally seen to have at best only indirect impacts on poverty and often deprioritise other development goals, such as the support for human rights (Piroska and Schlett 2023). Expanding their use in development policy therefore contradicts the first framing, and may also undermine claims in the second framing around the UK's global role as a 'force for good'. Blurring the boundaries between aid and export financing is also problematic and implies a usage of tied aid, i.e. when aid is tied to procurement from the UK. Tied aid is generally seen as less effective supporting partner country development objectives (Mawdsley et al. 2018), and indeed the 2022 International Development Act had committed the UK to untying all its aid.

The second implication of the third framing is that an increasing share of the aid budget should be spent by departments other than DFID/FCDO. This was already set out in the 2015 aid strategy: 'DFID will remain the UK's primary channel for aid. But to respond to the changing world, more aid will be administered by other government departments, drawing on their complementary skills' (HM Treasury and DFID 2015). While in 2018 DFID and the FCO spent 79.3% of all UK aid, by 2022 this share had declined to 59.7% (FCDO 2024). Some government departments either started spending ODA for the first time during this period, or saw significant increases in their spending. Whether this meant actually using a greater breadth of British expertise in aid is, however, questionable. Melvin (2023) argued that 'cash-strapped departments [sought] access to aid funds that were previously allocated to DfID in order to mitigate cuts to their own budgets'. Some of their existing expenditures have been made to fit the internationally agreed definition of what is aid (Champion 2022), in many cases without actually representing meaningful new projects in developing countries.

The government department which saw the largest increase in its share of the aid budget was the Home Office, as its share rocketed from 2.3% in 2018 to 23.3% in 2023 (ICAI 2022). These costs represent the housing of refugees in the UK. According to the internationally agreed definition of ODA (which the Conservative government had worked towards, see Mason 2016), costs around hosting and housing refugees following the first year of their arrival can be classed as aid. The UK did not report these costs as part of its ODA until 2009 at all, and most likely only reported partial costs until 2014 (ICAI 2022). However, refugee costs went up substantially after that as a share of ODA. Obviously, this funding does not reach developing countries at all and is spent entirely in the UK. Therefore, aid spending by the Home Office does not meet the criteria set out in the framing around using more British expertise in aid (although in a way it does support jobs in the UK). Its alignment with the first and second framings is also unclear: It does not contribute to solving global problems, nor is it likely to increase British influence. While the Conservative governments did implement a 'sort of whole-of-government' approach, this actually resulted in cuts to 'genuine' aid which reached developing countries, and it is questionable how much it managed to leverage a wider range of British expertise.



The different framings demonstrate not only changing dynamics within the British electorate, but also changes within the Conservative government. As circumstances changed, the justification of policy change also adapted, although the audience was always the same—voters who were, at best, uncertain about the benefits or purpose of ODA spending with concerns over domestic spending cuts. Populist rhetoric against aid resonated particularly with traditional Conservative voters, reflecting both genuine policy concerns and discourses they had seen or read about in the media. By using different framings, the UK government was able to mould its message to different circumstances, and any contradictions within the messages would almost certainly be overlooked or forgotten while the main message would remain dominant. The changes also reflect the individual attitudes of Prime Ministers, with David Cameron having a more positive view of aid compared to his successors.

All three framings of the national interest were undermined by the abandonment of the 0.7% target and the rapid budget cuts that followed. A crucial factor was that 0.5% aid spending had been set as a relatively hard ceiling, which gave the FCDO uncertainty over its year-on-year budget. Costs such as humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and Ukraine and the costs of the Home Office housing refugees can fluctuate. Therefore, the FCDO acts as a ‘saver of last resort’ and needs to adjust its spending, often at relatively short notice, so overall UK ODA spending does not exceed 0.5% (ICAI 2023: 8). This raises questions about aid effectiveness, as projects may need to be stalled, payments halted, etc. For example, in July 2022, the FCDO was forced to announce a spending pause on all ‘non-essential’ aid payments (ICAI 2023: 15). The need to make these adjustments to aid spending resulted in a direct impact on the project level. According to the OECD,

The scale and timing of the subsequent cuts hit partnerships hard, with reductions to country programmes enacted in-year and with very little notice to partners. The compounding nature of the budget cuts, with a larger share of funding also spent at home, has impacted the FCDO’s ability to programme ODA effectively over successive years. This has shifted resources away from partner countries including those in crisis and with an impact on quality’ (OECD 2024).

Africa was especially hard hit, with the Financial Times noting that this step was hugely damaging to the UK’s reputation (Cameron-Chilese et al. 2021) and prematurely closing projects has led to moral and relational harm (Morley and Silver 2023). Even areas highlighted as priorities suffered: Global health, emphasised as a priority area in the 2022 aid strategy, saw a reduction in funding from \$1.5 billion in 2020 to \$763 million in 2021 (Mao et al. 2023).

Conclusions

Using foreign aid to promote the national interests of donors has long been seen as a key driver of foreign aid policy. In times of austerity, however, politicians increasingly feel that aid spending, using public money, needs to deliver for domestic audiences as well as those in recipient countries, with aid flows and stoppages being



deeply political decisions about how to use finite resources (Allen and Flynn 2018). In the UK, aid became especially politicised by the mid-2010s as spending on it grew to unprecedented levels at a time when many other government departments were facing cuts. To counter public backlash, Conservative government rhetoric increasingly emphasised the need to use foreign aid to promote national interests.

This paper identified three different interpretations of the national interest used by successive Conservative governments, around global poverty reduction, British influence, leadership and ‘taking back control’, and trade, investments and jobs. This frequent reframing of the UK’s national interest around aid can be thought of as policy progression between different Prime Ministers and their teams in charge of foreign aid, but has also raised questions about what exactly the UK wants to achieve in the policy area. We showed how these framings of foreign aid in the national interest carried several implications when implemented in the practice of UK aid, leading to several further dilemmas. ‘Taking back control’ diverted aid from combating global problems such as poverty, and carried colonial overtones which likely did not sit well with partners. Merging DFID and the FCO, with the intention of creating the institutional conditions to project global influence more coherently undermined the UK’s image as a credible and reliable partner (Champion 2022), eroding existing UK soft power—exactly the opposite of what it sought to achieve. Subsequent budget cuts, and a diversion of aid to other government departments in turn further diminished the UK’s ability to contribute to poverty reduction and project influence. There is also evidence that suggests that opting for a definition of UK national interest around aid that creates UK jobs did not work in protecting aid from its many critics in the UK (Lowcock and Dissanayake 2024: 225).

Despite these problems surrounding the national interest rhetoric, it seems to have a certain staying power. Framing aid around the national interest within UK politics appears to be strong with Keir Starmer’s Labour government, which has not only been reluctant to re-open debates around increasing aid spending in the face of considerable electoral challenge, but has reduced the aid budget further, to 0.3% GNI in 2025 (Sumner 2024). This is perhaps sensible politics for a government facing economic headwinds and a need to increase military spending, given that the costs of cutting aid are felt generally outside the UK, while the need for additional funds to plug holes in the budget have domestic impacts. The political agenda for aid in the UK in 2025 and beyond is likely to continue focusing on justifying spending taxpayer money in the national interest, however, that phrase is interpreted. It now feels like a very long time ago since the 2010 Coalition Government pledged that they would ‘not balance the books on the backs of the poorest people in the world’ (Heppell and Lightfoot 2012).

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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