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Rethinking UK aid policy in an era of global funding cuts

How the UK can respond to emerging security and geopolitical risks

Jerome Puri and Olivia O'Sullivan

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Contents

Summary

- Global aid spending is undergoing its sharpest contraction in decades, with the 17 largest donors expected to cut more than $60 billion in aid between 2023 and 2026. France, Germany and the UK have all reduced their commitments, but the most dramatic shift has come from the US's 2025 decision to shut down USAID, Washington's main aid agency, and cancel over 80 per cent of US foreign aid contracts. At the same time, the Trump administration continues to raise doubts over US backing for the multilateral institutions central to humanitarian action and global development.
- These cuts will continue to have immediate negative impacts on poverty alleviation, healthcare and education in many countries, and on relief for people living in or fleeing conflict and crisis. But there are also wider consequences for global security and for the UK's geopolitical relationships and influence. This paper examines how the UK government can best respond to such challenges.
- Changing patterns of aid spending and weakening multilateral institutions will likely mean reduced international support and assistance for fragile and conflict-affected states, and reduced capacity for conflict prevention, peacebuilding and responding to humanitarian emergencies. This may have effects on international security and on migration patterns in a way that rebounds on the UK in the medium to long term. These shifts will also reduce resources for international institutions' work to maintain 'global public goods' – for example, to contain pandemic risks or monitor climate change.
- While states like Russia and China, geopolitical competitors to the West, will not fill funding gaps left by recent aid cuts, these governments will seek to position themselves as preferred and purportedly more reliable security and development partners for states in the Global South.
- The UK government faces difficult trade-offs, and it is unlikely that further aid funding will be made available. While international development once played a central role in British foreign policy – until recently, the UK was one of the few countries to have consistently met the UN target of spending 0.7 per cent of gross national income (GNI) on official development assistance (ODA) – successive funding cuts, new threats to European security, and wider donor retrenchment have all reduced the role of international development in UK policy. These factors have also strained the multilateral system in which the UK operates. Yet even under these constraints, the UK can take steps to better respond to the security and geopolitical consequences of global aid cuts. As such, this paper makes the following recommendations:

- The UK should more explicitly recognize the importance of states in the Global South for advancing shared interests in global stability and security. While many of these states – particularly among the 39 economies that have transitioned from low- to lower-middle- or upper-middle-income status in roughly the last 25 years – are far less reliant on aid than in the past, they will be adversely affected by the combination of global aid cuts, new US tariffs, and weakening multilateral structures for addressing international challenges such as health security. The UK should consider where it can work with European allies to make a clearer, consolidated offer to Global South states seeking wider partnerships on trade, security and priorities beyond aid.
- In the context of a more unpredictable US, there is an opening for the UK to work with fellow middle powers – including Australia, Canada, European allies and Japan – to prioritize, simplify and shore up institutions and parts of the multilateral system that are critical for managing global challenges, including by addressing aid fragmentation.
- The UK should guard against further loss of specialist capacity and knowledge within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). In particular, the government should prioritize retaining expertise on conflict prevention and response to manage the risk that poorer, conflict-affected states are neglected due to reduced aid budgets.
- Defence spending, which has grown at the expense of aid, must be properly scrutinized. Where appropriate, and where the links to UK national security are clear, resilience-focused defence spending could be aligned more deliberately with conflict prevention and conflict response.
- Finally, the UK government should make a more compelling case to the public about how remaining aid spending and wider multilateral action contribute to global stability and security – and thus to UK national interests. Outreach should include media engagements, ministerial statements, speeches and broader public communications.

01 Introduction

Western donors are pulling back on aid spending – driven by fiscal constraints, defence pressures and, in some cases, ideology. These cuts will have significant and widespread human consequences across the globe. But they also carry security and geopolitical implications for donors themselves, including the UK.

In the past two years, many donor countries have made significant cuts to their aid and development spending ('official development assistance' or ODA). In February 2025, the UK government announced it would cut its aid spending from 0.5 per cent of gross national income (GNI) to 0.3 per cent in 2027 to fund increased investment in defence. This will be the UK's lowest level of aid spending as a proportion of GNI since 1999.[1] France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden have also recently made significant cuts.[2]

Meanwhile, the US – hitherto consistently the world's largest aid donor, accounting for around 29 per cent of ODA from OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members in 2023[3] – has shuttered its government aid department, USAID, and permanently cancelled 83 per cent of US foreign aid contracts following an executive order by the Trump administration in early 2025.[4] The US Congress has continuously wrangled with the administration over the final amounts the US will spend on

1 Loft, P. and Brien, P. (2025), 'UK to reduce aid to 0.3% of gross national income from 2027', House of Commons Library, 28 February 2025, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/uk-to-reduce-aid-to-0-3-of-gross-national-income-from-2027.
2 Raga, S., Agarwal, P. and Fur, V. (2025), *Vulnerability of low- and middle-income countries to the impacts of aid cuts and US tariff increases*, ODI Global, August 2025, Vulnerability_of_LMICs_to_the_impacts_of_aid_cuts_and_US_tariff_increases.pdf.
3 OECD (undated), 'Official development assistance', https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/official-development-assistance-oda.html.
4 UN News (2025), 'Guterres calls on US to exempt development and humanitarian funds from aid 'pause'', 27 January 2025, https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/01/1159486; Schreiber, M. (2025), 'Rubio announces that 83% of USAID contracts will be canceled', NPR, 10 March 2025, https://www.npr.org/sections/goats-and-soda/2025/03/10/g-s1-52964/rubio-announces-that-83-of-usaid-contracts-will-be-canceled.

aid – but the Trump administration's budget request in May 2025 sought to reduce the wider foreign affairs budget by 84 per cent.[5]

Overall, analyses of OECD data show that spending on aid by the 17 largest donors will fall by $49.3 billion from $213.3 billion in 2023 to $164 billion in 2025.[6] This is projected to slide again to $146 billion by 2026 – in other words, global aid spending could fall by just over $67 billion, or 32 per cent, between 2023 and 2026.[7] While ODA spending was at a high in the early 2020s, much of this was driven by additional funding to Ukraine in the wake of Russia's invasion, and by spending in donor countries on the costs of hosting refugees and asylum seekers.[8] The recent cuts, combined with the US's increasing reluctance to work with international institutions and its rejection of many aspects of multilateral global development, mark a departure from the global aid system of recent decades.

Global aid spending could fall by just over $67 billion, or 32 per cent, between 2023 and 2026.

This will have significant human consequences. Countries that have relied on external financing for the delivery of vital services such as healthcare and education will have major budget shortfalls – as of 2025, 32 countries were receiving ODA equivalent to 25 per cent of their total health expenditure.[9] Major global health programmes face either steep cuts or at least disruption – as in the case of PEPFAR (the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), the US-funded anti-AIDS programme that has saved tens of millions of lives.[10] Overall, the UN estimates that the annual financing gap between what is needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 and what has already been invested or announced is now $4 trillion, up from $2.5 trillion in 2015.[11]

The risks which these financial deficits present are significant for countries receiving aid. But the cuts also have wider consequences for donors, including the UK. This research paper explores the emerging security and geopolitical implications of the aid cuts for the UK, and offers insights into how the government could

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5 Welch, Z., Setiabudi, N., Huntington, D. and Barter, E. (2025), 'US funding cuts: Projecting ODA amid uncertainty', Donor Tracker, 14 May 2025, https://donortracker.org/publications/us-funding-cuts-projecting-oda-amid-uncertainty-2025.
6 Laub, K. et al. (2025), 'The Budget Cuts Tracker', Donor Tracker, 4 July 2025, https://donortracker.org/publications/budget-cuts-tracker#how-are-individual-donors-oda-levels-projected-to-change.
7 Ibid.
8 Pudussery, J. and Gulrajani, N. (2025), 'Aid and defence: a data story of two global targets', ODI, 3 March 2025, https://odi.org/en/insights/aid-and-defence-a-data-story-of-two-global-targets.
9 UNICEF (undated), 'Investing in Health', https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/5961/file/unicef-uganda-2020-2021-health-budget-brief.pdf; Sabow, A. et al. (2025), 'The Generational Shift: The Future of Foreign Aid', McKinsey, Exhibit 5, 6 May 2025, https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/a-generational-shift-the-future-of-foreign-aid.
10 Onion-De, E. (2025), 'PEPFAR Has Saved Tens of Millions of Lives. Why Is It at Risk?', Council on Foreign Relations, 11 August 2025, https://www.cfr.org/article/pepfar-has-saved-tens-millions-lives-why-it-risk; Krugman, A. (2025), 'The State of Global Health Funding: August 2025', Think Global Health, 31 July 2025, https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/state-global-health-funding-august-2025; Apeagyei, A. E. et al. (2025), 'Tracking development assistance for health, 1990–2030: historical trends, recent cuts, and outlook', *The Lancet*, 406 (10501), pp. 337–48, https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(25)01240-1/fulltext; Godbole, R. (2025), 'Analyzing USAID Program Disruptions: Implications for PEPFAR Programming and Beneficiaries', Center for Global Development, 17 September 2025, https://www.cgdev.org/publication/analyzing-usaid-program-disruptions-implications-pepfar-programming-and-beneficiaries.
11 SDG Investment Trends Monitor (2023), 'SDG investment is growing, but too slowly: The investment gap is now $4 trillion, up from $2.5 in 2015', *SDG Investment Trends Monitor*, Issue 4, https://unctad.org/publication/sdg-investment-trends-monitor-issue-4.

respond. Among other themes, our analysis explores how the UK might work with like-minded middle powers – such as European donors, Australia and Canada – that are similarly affected.

In regard to the **security implications** of the aid cuts, we focus on two distinct but related risks. Firstly, the pattern of lower global aid spending means international funding for fragile and conflict-affected states – particularly on conflict prevention and peacebuilding – is likely to decrease. This could exacerbate existing conflicts, generate further regional instability and push more people to flee conflict, all of which could rebound on UK security in the medium to long term.[12] When determining cuts to the UK's own aid spending, government representatives said they would seek to preserve a focus on some key conflict zones, including Ukraine, Sudan and Gaza. In practice, however, while bilateral funding for Ukraine has been preserved, cuts in the 2025/26 financial year have resulted in a decline in bilateral spending for both Sudan and Palestine, as well as for other conflict-affected states such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria.[13] (Headline figures are not the whole story: the UK has sought to play a diplomatic role in the Sudan crisis, and did increase some funding to the country prior to this year, although subsequent cuts have meant the UK government response to the crisis has been more limited than it could have otherwise been.[14]) The effects of the UK's broader cuts may also be partially mitigated by the fact that the UK's non-bilateral spending on humanitarian response is set to decrease by only around 3 per cent. But the risk remains that some of these fragile contexts will be neglected.

Secondly, ODA cuts and the weakening of multilateral systems threaten the provision of 'global public goods' – i.e. benefits that transcend borders and which no one state can ultimately own or control, such as disease surveillance and aspects of climate action. In so far as reduced funding will affect international systems for managing climate and health security risks, this also has potential long-term consequences for protecting UK citizens against health, environmental and economic shocks.

In terms of the **geopolitical consequences**, the Western aid cuts, alongside the withdrawal of the US from development relationships and multilateral forums, will challenge the historic prominence of DAC members in the donor community and multilateral system. In particular, China, Russia and other states may benefit from positioning themselves as more consistent security or development partners for countries in the Global South, despite being unlikely to fill funding gaps or adhere to traditional aid spending formats. China, for example, is unlikely to provide funding in the same way as the US and allied countries have. Beijing's own relationship with other countries in the Global South is complex. But China may obtain soft power benefits from looking like the more reliable counterpart,

12 Justino, P. and Saavedra-Lux, L. (2023), 'Development aid cuts will hit fragile countries hard, could fuel violent conflict', The Conversation, 16 November 2023, https://theconversation.com/development-aid-cuts-will-hit-fragile-countries-hard-could-fuel-violent-conflict-215914.
13 International Development Committee of House of Commons (2025), 'Oral evidence: The development work of the FCDO, HC 531', p. 3, 13 May 2025, https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15886/pdf; Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) (2025), 'FCDO annual report and accounts 2024 to 2025', https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fcdo-annual-report-and-accounts-2024-to-2025.
14 Independent Commission for Aid Impact (2025), 'UK aid to Sudan', 15 October 2025, https://icai.independent.gov.uk/html-version/uk-aid-to-sudan/#section-0; Townsend, M. (2025), 'UK rejected atrocity prevention plans for Sudan despite warning of possible genocide', *Guardian*, 7 November 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/nov/07/aid-cuts-uk-rejected-atrocity-prevention-sudan-civilians-rsf-massacres-el-fasher.

especially as cuts to aid come alongside the US's shifting tariff policy, which has resulted in the application of steep duties on exports from a range of the world's poorest countries.[15]

The UK is not alone in confronting the security and geopolitical risks that arise from its own aid cuts and broader Western policies. Many other middle powers have also reduced their aid budgets – primarily due to fiscal and defence pressures rather than for the ideological reasons driving the US. While these cuts reflect a growing realism in foreign and national security policymaking, many middle powers – including European allies, Australia, Brazil, Canada and India – recognize a strategic interest in sustaining a functioning international system for addressing global challenges. Moreover, the UK shares overlapping interests with many developing countries in tackling these same challenges, including climate change, global health crises, debt and protectionism. At a time when many developing economies are seeking diversified partnerships beyond traditional aid, this convergence creates an opportunity for the UK to work with like-minded donors and developing countries to preserve some collective capacity to manage global risks and deliver mutual benefits.

Consequently, we argue that as the US steps back from its global role, countries such as the UK, Australia, Canada, Japan and key European partners should coordinate to reinforce parts of the international system most essential to the provision of global public goods and collective security, including those parts underpinning conflict response, health security and climate action. At the same time, the UK should make a clearer and more credible offer to developing states in the Global South; this means linking trade, research and security cooperation with development and debt relief, and consolidating some of these efforts with those of European partners. Many developing countries were already becoming less reliant on traditional aid, but they have significant concerns about the cost and sustainability of their public debt, timely access to finance and loans from international financial institutions, and wider questions of global stability; new offers of partnership should credibly respond to these issues.[16]

The UK should also guard against further loss of specialist capacity and knowledge within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and prioritize retaining expertise and personnel focused on conflict response and prevention in government to mitigate the risk that poorer, conflict-affected states are further destabilized. The UK should consider whether a proportion of new, resilience-focused defence spending could be devoted to conflict prevention where links to national security are clear. However, robust scrutiny of new defence spending will be needed to ensure such spending contributes to UK security. Finally, the UK needs to articulate a coherent public narrative that connects development spending to Britain's own security as well as to global stability.

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15 Kenny, C. (2025), 'A Proposal to Limit the Harm of US Tariffs on the World's Poorest Countries', Center for Global Development, 9 April 2025, https://www.cgdev.org/blog/proposal-limit-harm-us-tariffs-worlds-poorest-countries.
16 Kaldewei, C., Gu, B. and Dong, Y. (2023), *Accelerating middle-income countries' progress towards sustainable development*, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN DESA Policy Brief No.155, 29 November 2023, https://desapublications.un.org/policy-briefs/un-desa-policy-brief-no-155-accelerating-middle-income-countries-progress-towards-0; and Chappell, L., Pultz, S. and Srinavasa Desikan, B. (2025), 'Reset: Building Modern Partnerships with the Countries of the Global South', Institute for Public Policy Research, September 2025, https://www.ippr.org/articles/reset-building-modern-partnerships.

02
The changing aid landscape

Recent ODA cuts by major donors, including the UK, represent the steepest contraction of global aid in decades, but occur amid broader shifts in global governance, many driven by the US.

Since early 2025, the Trump administration has suspended or withdrawn funding for key multilateral institutions and initiatives, including the Paris Agreement on climate change, the World Health Organization (WHO) and some UN agencies, and ordered a review of US membership in all international organizations.[17] The administration's budget proposal to Congress for 2026 also includes cuts to the IMF budget and makes no provision for US financial contributions to the UN core budget, most UN agencies or the OECD. While the proposal is more of a political signal than a final financial settlement, it shows the Trump administration's intent towards these institutions.[18] Indeed, in March 2025, during a UN General Assembly meeting, a US representative to the UN denounced the concept and language of the SDGs, the existing organizing framework for global development, as 'globalist' and 'adverse to the rights and interests of Americans'.[19]

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17 The White House (2025), 'Withdrawing the United States from and Ending Funding to Certain United Nations Organizations and Reviewing United States Support to all International Organizations', 4 February 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-and-ending-funding-to-certain-united-nations-organizations-and-reviewing-united-states-support-to-all-international-organizations.
18 Hurlburt, H. (2025), 'Flux in President Trump's trade and foreign policy is the new normal. Can world leaders regain some initiative?', Chatham House Expert Comment, 21 August 2025, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/08/flux-president-trumps-trade-and-foreign-policy-new-normal-can-world-leaders-regain-some.
19 United States Mission to the United Nations (2025), 'Remarks at the UN meeting entitled 58th Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly', 4 March 2025, https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-the-un-meeting-entitled-58th-plenary-meeting-of-the-general-assembly; Tooze, A. (2025), 'The End of Development', *Foreign Policy*, 8 September 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/09/08/adam-tooze-un-sustainable-development-goals-us-aid-finance-economy.

Thus, the US is stepping back from its role in the institutions it helped create in the aftermath of the Second World War,[20] marking a significant shift away from the global aid paradigm of previous years.[21] And although previous US administrations have expressed scepticism about development and multilateralism,[22] this was not coupled with such dramatic cuts to US aid funding, nor with the US's imposition of high tariffs on many low-income countries – two recent shifts that have hit many states in the Global South at once.[23]

These dynamics compound long-standing challenges to global coordination on reducing poverty, preventing or resolving conflict, and providing global public goods (the latter has included work on problems such as the COVID-19 pandemic and developing-country debt). The current approach to these issues stands in contrast to earlier periods when collective mobilization was more intensive and effective, for example during the G20's response to the 2008–09 global financial crisis and in the debt-relief initiatives of the early 2000s.[24]

For the UK, both this wider shift in global aid and the country's own latest cuts come in the wake of major changes to the government's approach to aid and development. A rushed merger of the independent Department for International Development (DFID) with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in 2020 was followed by steep ODA cuts the following year. While the merger was initially described as an attempt to integrate the UK's development and diplomatic toolkits, making for a more politically informed and agile approach to development, in practice the department lost expertise, and UK development policy lost focus.[25]

But the UK has also undergone a wider shift in its foreign policy and global approach: where once development spending was seen as a cornerstone of the UK's soft power and strategic global engagement, the government is now focused on the Russia–Ukraine war and on immediate questions of the UK's own security.[26]

This creates difficult policy and funding trade-offs. The presence of a war in Europe demands investment in the UK's defence. At the same time, the UK faces more significant fiscal challenges than it did when the country spent more on aid, while public opinion – though often supportive of development spending in the abstract –

20 Woods, N. (2025), 'Order Without America: How the International System Can Survive a Hostile Washington', *Foreign Affairs*, 22 April 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/donald-trump-order-without-america-ngaire-woods.
21 Opalo, K. (2025), 'Why ending aid dependency is an opportunity for African countries', Semafor, 24 February 2025, https://www.semafor.com/article/02/24/2025/why-ending-aid-dependency-is-an-opportunity-for-africa.
22 Toosi, N. (2018), 'Bolton returns to a U.N. he made a career of blasting', *Politico*, 23 September 2018, https://www.politico.com/story/2018/09/23/john-bolton-united-nations-iran-836454.
23 Raga, Agarwal and Fur (2025), *Vulnerability of low- and middle-income countries to the impacts of aid cuts and US tariff increases*.
24 Menon, S. (2022), 'Nobody Wants the Current World Order', *Foreign Affairs*, 3 August 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/nobody-wants-current-world-order; International Monetary Fund (undated), 'Debt Relief Under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative', https://www.imf.org/en/About/Factsheets/Sheets/2023/Debt-relief-under-the-heavily-indebted-poor-countries-initiative-HIPC.
25 Independent Commission for Aid Impact (2023), 'Brexit, COVID-19 and budget reductions put extraordinary pressure on UK aid since 2019', 13 September 2023, https://icai.independent.gov.uk/brexit-covid-pressure-on-uk-aid-since-2019.
26 Contrast the section on development in the UK's 2015 National Security Strategy with the relatively limited mentions of its role in the 2025 document. UK Government (2015), *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, November 2015, p. 48, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a74c796ed915d502d6caefc/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SD_Review_web_only.pdf; UK Government (2025), 'National Security Strategy 2025', Cabinet Office, 24 June 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-2025-security-for-the-british-people-in-a-dangerous-world.

remains unconvinced about prioritizing aid now.[27] The global aid system that prevailed in the era when the UK spent 0.7 per cent of GNI on aid – the target set by the UN General Assembly in 1970 and enshrined in British law in 2015 – had significant flaws, including: problems with accountability and transparency; incentives often constructed to meet the goals of distant donors rather than the needs of affected publics; and, arguably, limited political analysis informing how development money was spent.[28]

But, despite these failings, that same system has also been highly effective in some sectors, particularly via investments in health.[29] Evidence reviews suggest that aid spending also brought global stability and security returns for donors like the UK.[30] But the US's shift away from its role as the leading donor and underwriter of the multilateral system, alongside wider cuts across other major donors, means systems for addressing collective security and transnational problems are under pressure. This will affect the UK and its geopolitical relationships.

Faced with these trade-offs, the UK government has made decisions on near-term priorities for its aid budget.[31] On the upside, these decisions include increasing or largely preserving FCDO funding (ODA and non-ODA) for multilateral institutions and key thematic areas, such as humanitarian action (down a modest 3.1 per cent in fiscal year 2025/26), climate action (up 59 per cent over the same period) and international finance (up 52 per cent). At the bilateral level, the UK is increasing or preserving spending on strategically significant partners. Examples include Indonesia (up 231.6 per cent in fiscal year 2025/26), Turkey (up 39.5 per cent), Nigeria (up 15.1 per cent), Pakistan (up 1.9 per cent), Ukraine (up 1.8 per cent) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (up 1.3 per cent). Given fiscal constraints, these choices reflect an effort to support the multilateral system and to improve and focus on the work of international financial institutions, while maintaining engagement in contexts central to UK foreign and security interests.

At the same time, these decisions necessarily carry implications for other areas.[32] At the thematic level, total direct FCDO spending (ODA and non-ODA) on health has decreased by 46 per cent in fiscal year 2025/26 (though some multilateral contributions, categorized separately, will also contribute to global health), while funding earmarked for multilateral human rights initiatives has declined by 65 per cent. Bilateral budget reductions have been made for recipients that include Lebanon (down 40.3 per cent), Syria (down 35.7 per cent), Somalia (down 27.3 per cent), Ethiopia (down 24.8 per cent), Nepal (down 22.6 per cent), Kenya (down 20.8 per cent), Palestine (down 20.7 per cent), Afghanistan (down

27 Aspinall, E. and Keogh, E. (2025), 'UK Public Opinion Policy Group on Foreign Policy and Global Affairs: Annual Survey – 2025', British Foreign Policy Group, July 2025, pp. 53–59, https://bfpg.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/BFPG-UK-Opinion-Report-Annual-Survey-2025.pdf.
28 Opalo (2025), 'Why ending aid dependency is an opportunity for African countries'.
29 Pritchett, L. (undated), 'Development Happened. Did Aid Help?', https://lantpritchett.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Development-Happened-Did-Aid-Help-handbook-chapter.pdf; Barder, O. (2013), 'Is Aid a Waste of Money?', Center for Global Development, 5 December 2013, https://www.cgdev.org/blog/aid-waste-money.
30 Heidland, T., Michael, M., Schularick, M. and Thiele, R. (2025), *Identifying Mutual Interests: How Donor Countries Benefit from Foreign Aid*, Kiel Institute, June 2025, https://www.kielinstitut.de/publications/identifying-mutual-interests-how-donor-countries-benefit-from-foreign-aid-18177.
31 FCDO (2025), *Annual Report and Accounts 2024–2025*, July 2025, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/687e39109914d1f63267c5e5/FCDO-Annual-Report-and-Accounts-2024-2025.pdf.
32 Ibid.

18.4 per cent) and Sudan (down 17.7 per cent). Moreover, these are budget allocations only for 2025/26; the ODA budget is set to decline further in the next financial year (2026/27).

Despite these cuts, the government has sought to regain the initiative in diplomatic engagement with countries across the Global South. Former UK foreign secretary David Lammy set out an ambition to pursue a strategic reset with these countries and jettison aspects of older aid relationships that were patronizing or ineffective.[33] As many developing countries have become wealthier (39 countries have graduated from low-income status in roughly the last 25 years), direct aid provision has become less important to some than other areas of mutual cooperation.[34] And UK strategy more broadly has long recognized the importance, at least rhetorically, of a Global South rising in power and influence – not least because of the critical role many of these countries might play in mitigating the effects of growing US–China rivalry and in addressing global challenges.[35] But while the government's argument recognizes the need to move beyond traditional donor–recipient relations, the shift in approach will nevertheless need to account for the impact of ODA cuts on developing countries and the UK's relationships with them.

The remainder of this research paper will outline the emerging security and geopolitical consequences of recent aid cuts, and the wider risks for the UK from the shift away from the previous aid paradigm. The paper will also suggest how the UK can respond. The government faces difficult choices, and it is unlikely that new spending will be forthcoming. But even within these constraints, the UK can better align its approach to development, security and foreign policy.

Method and approach

This paper is based on a review of academic and grey literature examining the relationship between aid, security and geopolitics, and on emerging analyses of the effects of the 2025 global ODA cuts. It also draws on insights from three private roundtables on the future of development assistance, held under the Chatham House Rule[36] in 2025; and insights from semi-structured interviews conducted between August and October 2025 with academics, senior representatives of humanitarian and development organizations, security practitioners, and former diplomats and officials. Interviewees participated on the condition of anonymity, but have experience in relevant institutions such as the World Bank, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the FCDO, and in contexts such as Kenya, Myanmar, Sudan and Syria. Secondary quantitative data, including on ODA spending, were drawn from official sources such as the FCDO and OECD.

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33 FCDO (2025), 'The Locarno Speech by the Foreign Secretary', 9 January 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-locarno-speech-by-the-foreign-secretary-9-january-2025.
34 Kaldewei, Gu and Dong (2023), *Accelerating middle-income countries' progress towards sustainable development*.
35 Cabinet Office (2023), *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world*, March 2023, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/641d72f45155a2000c6ad5d5/11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf.
36 'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.' Chatham House (undated), 'Chatham House Rule', https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule.

On terminology, the paper uses 'developing countries' to refer to low-income and lower-middle-income countries as classified by the World Bank.[37] We also use the term 'Global South', primarily to reflect the way this term is used by leaders and states themselves, especially in relation to the geopolitics of development – for example, when China positions itself as a 'voice' of the Global South. We acknowledge the conceptual limitations of these labels, as well as the diversity of the countries they describe, but retain them given their prominence in current policy debates. Where we refer to fragility and conflict, we are referring to countries classified as affected by ongoing 'fragile and conflict-affected situations' as defined by the World Bank.[38]

The remaining analysis is structured into three parts. Chapter 3 examines a variety of security risks arising from global ODA cuts, with a focus on neglected conflicts and global health security. Chapter 4 explores the geopolitical consequences, including the responses of emerging powers such as China and the impacts of global aid cuts on the multilateral system. The final chapter sets out recommendations for how the UK can respond strategically to the changing aid landscape.

37 World Bank (undated), 'The World by Income and Region', https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html (accessed 8 Oct. 2025).
38 World Bank (undated), 'Classification of Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations', https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/brief/classification-of-fragile-and-conflict-affected-situations.

03 Security consequences of ODA cuts

Reductions in aid to fragile and conflict-affected states risk entrenching instability and generating wider spillover effects. The cuts also threaten the provision of global public goods, in areas such as health and climate security, with tangible consequences for the UK.

The substantial cuts to global aid spending, combined with weakening multilateralism and growing geopolitical competition, carry significant implications for global and UK security. In this chapter, we review two dimensions of this – first, the risk that aid cuts could worsen fragility and conflict in countries already facing extreme poverty, displacement and violence. Such crises generate instability, migration pressures and transnational threats that could spill over into wider security concerns for the UK in the medium and long term. Second, reductions in ODA undermine the provision of global public goods – including disease surveillance, vaccination and action on climate change.

Conflict and instability

A significant proportion of ODA funding has long focused on preventing conflicts and stabilizing fragile and conflict-affected countries. Extreme poverty is increasingly concentrated in these countries – while GDP per capita has grown steadily in other developing economies over the last 25 years, conflict-affected states have remained in extreme poverty.[39] By 2030, they will account for 60 per cent of the world's extreme poor – not least because conflict and poverty are linked and exacerbate each other.[40] Between 2010 and 2022, the amount of ODA going to the world's most conflict-affected countries doubled, from $41 billion to $83 billion.[41]

The current cuts and other trends in aid jeopardize support for conflict-affected countries, and risk exacerbating the concentration of deep poverty and intertwined crises in fragile states around the world.

The current cuts and other trends in aid jeopardize support for these countries, and risk exacerbating the concentration of deep poverty and intertwined crises in fragile states around the world. Early analyses suggest many of the countries likely to be hit hardest by the combination of aid cuts and US tariffs are conflict-affected or fragile, particularly Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Ukraine.[42] In addition, development institutions increasingly rely on mobilizing private investment to offset the insufficiency of public funding, but private finance tends to avoid fragile markets in favour of safer, middle-income contexts. By some recent estimates, most of the private finance mobilized by development institutions between 2012 and 2020 went to middle-income countries.[43] Furthermore, donors and development banks have sought to spend more on addressing climate change in recent years to hit international targets on climate finance. But climate finance also tends to flow more towards middle-income countries, which are better set up to absorb investment in infrastructure and energy.[44]

In the 2010s, the UK prioritized fragile and conflict-affected states: the government committed to spending 50 per cent of its ODA on such countries, and recognized in policy documents the links between development and security.[45] But since the merger of DFID and the FCO and subsequent reductions in aid spending, UK bilateral aid allocated to fragile and conflict-affected states has significantly declined: total UK ODA for these states decreased by 40 per cent (or £740 million) between 2020

39 Hill, S., Khadan, J. and Selcuk, P. (2025), *Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations: Intertwined Crises, Multiple Vulnerabilities*, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, June 2025, p. 7, figure 4.2, https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/35bb4b31-e9b0-4a1e-8c6c-df4336558673/content.
40 Ibid.; Rohwerder, B. (2014), 'The Impact of Conflict on Poverty', Institute of Development Studies, 14 July 2014, https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/the-impact-of-conflict-on-poverty.
41 Hill, Khadan and Selcuk, (2025), *Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations: Intertwined Crises, Multiple Vulnerabilities*, p. 40, Figure 4.18C.
42 Raga, Agarwal and Fur (2025), *Vulnerability of low- and middle-income countries to the impacts of aid cuts and US tariff increases*.
43 OECD (2023), 'Private Finance Mobilised by Official Development Finance Interventions', January 2023, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2023/01/private-finance-mobilised-by-official-development-finance-interventions_b2e9927e/c5fb4a6c-en.pdf.
44 Climate Finance (2025), 'Understanding Climate Finance Flows: Global to Local', 6 June 2025, https://www.climatefinance.org/finance-flows-guide.
45 UK Government (2015), *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015*.

and 2021.[46] The disorderly withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan also undermined the idea of links between aid and longer-term security, as it highlighted the limits of development aid in making a difference to a country's stability when broader political and military strategies fail.[47]

Reviews of available evidence nonetheless suggest that, in a wider range of contexts, and when well designed and carefully managed, aid targeted at conflict prevention and stability can help to prevent or reduce violence.[48] Aid can cushion economies from shocks that might otherwise spark unrest. It can support inclusive institutions that reduce grievances among local populations. And it can provide tangible improvements in livelihoods, thereby lessening the appeal of armed groups. Post-conflict aid has also been shown to help countries rebuild institutions and infrastructure, reducing the risk of relapse into violence.[49]

On the other hand, there are also examples where aid flows have been manipulated by warring parties, where poorly managed aid interacts with the conflict economy and exacerbates violence, or where aid interventions show poor results. There are limitations to existing evidence on the positive or negative impacts of aid, particularly in relation to conflict contexts where multiple factors are at play – though some studies suggest that abrupt withdrawals of aid funding can trigger violence.[50] Yet 'aid' is not a monolithic phenomenon – much depends on the type of assistance provided, its tailoring to the political context, and the long-term focus of donors.

The argument that there is a direct relationship between aid spending and migration – essentially, that development reduces migration – has long been contentious. In fact, recipient countries that have become more prosperous often see an increase in the number of people leaving for wealthier countries as citizens' aspirations broaden and as people obtain the means to depart.[51] While evidence of a direct correlation between aid spending and reduced migration overall is thus limited, the relationship between the two is not straightforward.[52] It is important to note that economic migration is distinct from the refugee flows that occur during conflict. In the latter cases, conflict is a driver of migration, especially for people in low-income countries.[53]

46 Walton, O. and Johnstone, A. (2023), 'The fragmentation of the security-development nexus: the UK government's approach to security and development 2015-2022', *Peacebuilding*, 12(3), pp. 429–44, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21647259.2023.2291920#d1e855; Banks, N. (2023), 'Reinstating concrete commitments to fragile and conflict-affected states can promote stability and security in places like Syria', Bond, 15 March 2023, https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2023/03/reinstating-concrete-commitments-to-fragile-and-conflict-affected-states-can-promote-stability-and-security-in-places-like-syria.
47 Walton and Johnstone (2023), 'The fragmentation of the security-development nexus: the UK government's approach to security and development 2015-2022'.
48 Heidland, Michael, Schularick and Thiele (2025), *Identifying Mutual Interests: How Donor Countries Benefit from Foreign Aid*.
49 Ibid.
50 Nielsen, R. et al. (2011), 'Foreign Aid Shocks as a Cause of Violent Armed Conflict', *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(2), pp. 219–32, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23025047.
51 Dennison, S., Fine, S. and Gowan, R. (2019), *False moves: Migration and development aid*, European Council on Foreign Relations, policy brief, 8 October 2019, https://ecfr.eu/publication/false_moves_migration_and_development_aid/#a2.
52 Dreher, A., Fuchs, A. and Langlotz, S. (2019), 'The Effects of Foreign Aid on Refugee Flows', *European Economic Review*, 112, pp. 127–47, https://www.jointdatacenter.org/literature_review/the-effects-of-foreign-aid-on-refugee-flows.
53 Crippa, A., d'Agostino, G., Dunne, P. and Pieroni, L. (2022), *Conflict as a Cause of Migration*, Munich Personal RePEc Archive paper No. 112327, 13 January 2022, https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/112327/1/MPRA_paper_112327.pdf.

The downstream costs of failing to prevent or manage conflicts are high – in terms of costs for handling refugee flows, and other spillover effects – and often far greater than the costs would have been for preventive or stabilization measures.[54] In addition to the impacts mentioned already, worsening conflicts disrupt supply chains and trade. They also affect international security by providing fertile ground for extremist movements and organized crime.[55]

Most refugees fleeing conflict go to neighbouring countries rather than to donor countries in more distant locations.[56] The majority of the world's displaced people are located in low- and middle-income states.[57] Reductions to international aid for refugees risk exhausting the patience of host governments and communities, many of which are geopolitically important to the UK. Kenya, for example, has hosted large numbers of Somali refugees for decades, while also serving as a key security partner for the UK in East Africa.[58] Bangladesh has borne the brunt of the Rohingya refugee crisis for years, straining its own resources and social fabric.[59] The current UN response plan for supporting the Rohingya has a funding gap of over $170 million just to meet urgent needs in 2025.[60] If international donors withdraw support, these governments may face growing domestic pressures to close borders, restrict rights, or push refugees back into dangerous conditions – actions that could fuel instability and undermine regional security.[61]

If international donors withdraw support, governments may face growing domestic pressures to close borders, restrict rights, or push refugees back into dangerous conditions – actions that could fuel instability and undermine regional security.

As the aid system changes, there is a risk that remaining donor funding for fragile and conflict-affected states will increasingly come in the form of short-term humanitarian assistance in response to immediate crises, which tends to be a more politically palatable priority. This remains essential for minimizing the human costs of conflict and other emergencies, but it does not necessarily address the long-term drivers of instability and insecurity. In fact, as great power competition absorbs diplomatic attention and as ODA declines, resources and diplomatic bandwidth for more complex, long-term approaches – such as conflict prevention, peacebuilding and other kinds of violence-prevention activities – could be neglected. This would carry significant human costs, and would generate spillover effects in terms

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 UNHCR (2025), 'Refugee Data Finder – Key Indicators', last update 12 June 2025, https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics.
57 Ibid.
58 European Commission (undated), 'European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations: Kenya', https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/africa/kenya_en.
59 Macdonald, G., Mekker, I. and Mooney, L. (2023), *Conflict Dynamics between Bangladeshi Host Communities and Rohingya Refugees*, United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 519, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/sr-519_conflict-dynamics-bangladeshi-host-communities-rohingya-refugees.pdf.
60 Rohingya Refugee Response Bangladesh (undated), 'About the Rohingya Refugee Response', https://rohingyaresponse.org.
61 UNHCR (undated), 'Refugee Data Finder – Key Indicators'.

of irregular migration and wider threats to security. Interviewees for this project highlighted that with intense Western attention on Ukraine and the Middle East, there is a risk that conflicts across Sudan and the Sahel, as well as the fragile post-conflict situation in Syria, may receive less attention, funding and diplomatic consideration. Cuts also threaten the ability of the international aid system to respond to conflicts in the short term: i.e. to provide sufficient and well-governed emergency humanitarian aid. In December 2024, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) launched its 2025 *Global Humanitarian Overview* report;[62] in the report, OCHA calculated that $47.4 billion in humanitarian aid was needed in 2025. Yet by halfway through the year, just $5.6 billion had been received. In response, OCHA launched a 'hyper-prioritized' appeal in June for the most urgent $29 billion.[63]

The neglect of fragile and conflict-affected states poses geopolitical risks for the UK. Powers such as Russia and Iran have often viewed instability as an opportunity to expand their influence and undermine Western engagement. This includes providing military assistance and financial support to entrench authoritarian regimes or armed groups aligned with their interests. For example, both Russia and Iran have intervened extensively in Syria over the last decade, in attempts to influence security conditions on the ground and wider conflict outcomes. Although the UK recently restored diplomatic ties with Syrian authorities for the first time since 2012, the political transition in the country remains fragile: violence persists in several regions, public services and infrastructure remain severely disrupted, and UN appeals are critically underfunded.[64] Any renewed conflict in Syria could have significant geopolitical repercussions, including for regional stability, refugee flows and Western policy in the Middle East. More broadly, these developments underscore the point that neglecting fragile states can create vacuums which adversarial powers can exploit, with direct implications both for the UK's strategic interests and for regional stability.

Global public goods and the multilateral system

Alongside impacts due to the neglect of conflict-affected states, the ODA cuts present medium- to long-term security risks related to the underfunding and under-provision of global public goods.[65] The term 'global public goods' refers to goods whose benefits transcend borders, and which one country cannot 'capture' at the expense of others.[66] Examples include infectious disease surveillance, vaccination against epidemic-prone

62 OCHA (2024), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2025*, 4 December 2024, https://humanitarianaction.info/document/global-humanitarian-overview-2025.
63 OCHA (2025), 'UN, partners unveil hyper-prioritized aid appeal amid 'cruel math' of brutal funding cuts', 16 June 2025, https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/un-partners-unveil-hyper-prioritized-aid-appeal-amid-cruel-math-brutal-funding-cuts.
64 UN (2025), 'Funding shortages risk undermining a 'watershed moment' for Syria', UN News, 17 March 2025, https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/03/1161201; Quilliam, N. (2024), 'While international support is crucial, Syrians must lead their country's political transition', Chatham House Expert Comment, 11 December 2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/while-international-support-crucial-syrians-must-lead-their-countrys-political-transition.
65 Heidland, Michael, Schularick and Thiele (2025), *Identifying Mutual Interests: How Donor Countries Benefit from Foreign Aid*.
66 Chin, M. (2021), 'What are Global Public Goods?', *Finance & Development*, IMF, December 2021, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2021/12/Global-Public-Goods-Chin-basics.

pathogens, and climate action. The provision of global public goods has typically relied on ODA and other forms of international collective action, particularly for global health security.[67]

Global health security

Global health security refers to the international collective capacity to prevent, detect and respond to public health threats.[68] Importantly, this is a transnational challenge: prevention and response depend on effective health systems (e.g., routine immunization, epidemiological surveillance and primary healthcare) in both developing countries and advanced economies – a fact that has been long recognized by the FCDO, and has justified the prioritization of health in the ODA spending of many OECD donors.[69]

US funding played the most significant – and potentially irreplaceable – role in this system. But the UK is also a leading contributor to global health security. The country has historically been among the largest state supporters of WHO and Gavi (the Vaccine Alliance), initially committing £1.65 billion to the latter for the period 2026–30.[70] The UK established the Fleming Fund in 2015, which funds the prevention of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) globally, while other flagship initiatives, such as the Tackling Deadly Diseases in Africa programme and the ASCEND programme, have addressed neglected and vaccine-preventable diseases in several high-risk contexts through the strengthening of public health systems.[71] As such, the UK has invested in global health security as a strategic priority and, while it does not match US funding, plays a critical role in specialist areas like AMR prevention.

Although the UK has sought to preserve contributions to some key global health institutions (such as WHO), the UK's ODA cuts nevertheless impact funding for global health initiatives at a time when US policies are systematically undermining the global health security architecture. The FCDO's *Annual Report and Accounts 2024–2025* show that UK aid spending classified as covering 'health' has already declined by around 45 per cent, from £1.77 billion in 2023/24 to £975 million in 2024/25, and that it will fall by a further 46 per cent to £527 million in 2025/26 – although it is important to note that this category may not always capture funding with broader purposes than health, even though such funding can contribute to desirable health outcomes.[72] The Health Institutions and

67 Elgar, K. (2023), 'Where global public goods meet development aid', Development Matters, OECD blog, 22 May 2023, https://oecd-development-matters.org/2023/05/22/where-global-public-goods-meet-development-aid.
68 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2024), 'Global Health Security', https://www.cdc.gov/global-health/topics-programs/global-health-security.html.
69 FCDO (2021), *Health Systems Strengthening for Global Health Security and Universal Health Coverage*, Position Paper, December 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61b093eae90e0704423dc07c/Health-Systems-Strengthening-Position-Paper.pdf.
70 Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (undated), 'Donor Profile - United Kingdom', https://www.gavi.org/investing-gavi/funding/donor-profiles/united-kingdom.
71 Fleming Fund (2025), 'Our Activities', Fleming Fund, https://www.flemingfund.org/our-approach/our-activities; FCDO (2024), 'Accelerating Sustainable Control and Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) – Programme GB-1-205249', DevTracker programme summary, https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/programme/GB-1-205249/summary.
72 FCDO (2025), *Annual Report and Accounts 2024–2025*.

Health Security Department within the FCDO is particularly impacted, with the department's budget being cut by 61 per cent from £806 million to £314 million. In July 2025, the UK announced that it plans to close the Fleming Fund, which has supported 25 countries in Africa and Asia in addressing AMR through investments in surveillance systems and laboratory capacity.[73] The UK also reduced its pledge to the 2026–30 funding cycle for Gavi by £400 million.[74]

The impact of donor-wide ODA cuts on health security is already being reported. A WHO analysis across 108 country offices for March–April 2025 found that 70 per cent reported disruptions linked to ODA cuts since the start of 2025.[75] The most severely affected services[76] were the systems that underpin the global capacity to monitor, prepare for and respond to outbreaks of preventable diseases. Likewise, the FCDO's equality impact assessment of ODA programme allocations for 2025/26 found that the cuts will disproportionately affect Africa, women's health, initiatives to strengthen health systems, and emergency response.[77] The assessment states that 'reductions to health spending risk an increase in disease burden and ultimately in deaths, impacting in particular those living in poverty, women, children and people with disabilities'.[78]

Reductions in ODA for routine immunization, surveillance and primary care increase the likelihood of outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases.

Reductions in ODA for routine immunization, surveillance and primary care increase the likelihood of outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases. WHO, UNICEF and Gavi report increasing rates of measles, meningitis and yellow fever and have warned that continued underinvestment in health systems, compounded by ODA cuts, is likely to drive further escalation.[79] With measles, for example, while multiple factors besides ODA cuts – such as vaccine hesitancy and disruptions to routine healthcare caused by the COVID-19 pandemic[80] – have played a role, cases have risen annually since 2021 and were estimated at 10.3 million in 2023

73 Burki, T. (2025), 'UK Government dismantles the Fleming Fund', *The Lancet Microbe*, 5 September 2025, https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247(25)00167-3/fulltext.
74 Schraer, R. (2025), 'UK pledge to global vaccine effort falls £400m to £1.25bn amid raft of aid cuts', *The Independent*, 25 June 2025, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/uk-aid-cuts-budget-vaccine-gavi-b2776890.html.
75 World Health Organization (2025), *The impact of suspensions and reductions in health official development assistance on health systems: Rapid WHO country office stock take (7 March – 2 April 2025)*, 10 April 2025, https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/integrated-health-services-(ihs)/impact-of-suspensions-and-reductions-in-health-oda-on-health-systems.pdf.
76 Ibid. These services were: 'health emergency preparedness and response', 'public health surveillance', 'health information systems', 'outbreak alert and detection monitoring', and 'vaccination outreach and campaigns'.
77 FCDO (2025), *Equality impact assessment of Official Development Assistance (ODA) programme allocations for 2025 to 2026*, updated 2 September 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fcdo-official-development-assistance-programme-allocations-2025-to-2026-equality-impact-assessment/equality-impact-assessment-of-official-development-assistance-oda-programme-allocations-for-2025-to-2026.
78 Ibid.
79 World Health Organization (2025), 'Increases in vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks threaten years of progress, warn WHO, UNICEF, Gavi', WHO news release, 24 April 2025, https://www.who.int/news/item/24-04-2025-increases-in-vaccine-preventable-disease-outbreaks-threaten-years-of-progress--warn-who--unicef--gavi.
80 Gaythorpe, K. A. M. et al. (2021), 'Impact of COVID-19-related disruptions to measles, meningococcal A, and yellow fever vaccination in 10 countries', *eLife*, Vol. 10, June 2024, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8263060.

(20 per cent higher than 2022).[81] In the 12 months to April 2025, 138 countries reported measles cases, including 61 large or disruptive outbreaks (some in high-income countries).[82]

The cuts also fall on programmes and health systems that are essential to pandemic preparedness and response. Prior to the cuts, estimates projected the annual probability of a COVID-19-scale pandemic for any year to be 2.5–3.3 per cent.[83] While ODA alone is not sufficient to prevent outbreaks, nor are cuts their primary cause, aid does contribute to more effective preparedness and can save costs in the long term. The estimated cost of the UK government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic exceeded £300 billion,[84] indicating the pressure that health crises have put on the UK's fiscal space and ability to pay for other priorities, such as defence and development.

ODA cuts also risk undermining efforts to reduce or contain AMR, both at home and abroad. The government plans to mitigate the impact of the planned closure of the Fleming Fund through a new 'partnership' model,[85] but details are yet to be formalized, and there are likely to be gaps in high-risk contexts in the interim. This comes at a time when pre-existing estimates suggest that global deaths from AMR could increase by 60 per cent by 2050, with 1.34 million people in the US and 184,000 in the UK dying each year from antibiotic-resistant pathogens,[86] while other estimates show that AMR-associated deaths in the UK could reach between 27,500 and 39,200 per year by 2030.[87] The economic costs are also potentially significant: analysis suggests that a 15 per cent increase in resistance rates would leave the global economy $1.7 trillion smaller in 2050 than it would otherwise be, with the US, UK and EU economies among the hardest hit.[88]

Global health has also become a critical vector of geopolitical competition. During the COVID-19 pandemic – which coincided with the UK's 2021 cut in ODA spending from 0.7 per cent to 0.5 per cent of GNI – Western governments faced criticism for stockpiling vaccines rather than coordinating an equitable multilateral response.[89] China has sought to capitalize on the capacity gaps and resentment this

81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Glassman, A. and Smitham, E. (2021), 'The Next Pandemic Could Come Sooner and Be Deadlier', Center for Global Development, 25 August 2021, https://www.cgdev.org/blog/the-next-pandemic-could-come-soon-and-be-deadlier; and G20 High Level Independent Panel (2021), *A Global Deal for Our Pandemic Age: Report of the G20 High Level Independent Panel on Financing the Global Commons for Pandemic Preparedness and Response*, July 2021, https://pandemic-financing.org/files/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/g20-hlip-report.pdf.
84 Government of the United Kingdom (2025), 'UK adopts historic Pandemic Agreement', Department of Health & Social Care and FCDO, press release, 20 May 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-adopts-historic-pandemic-agreement; see also House of Commons Library (2025), *Public spending during the Covid-19 pandemic*, Research Briefing CBP-9309, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9309/CBP-9309.pdf.
85 House of Commons International Development Committee (2025), *Oral evidence: Global Health Challenges and the UK, HC 1185*, 15 July 2025, https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/16340/pdf.
86 Smith, A. (2025), 'Superbugs could kill millions more and cost $2tn a year by 2050, models show', *Guardian*, 20 July 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/jul/20/superbugs-could-kill-millions-more-and-cost-2tn-a-year-by-2050-models-show.
87 Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (2023), 'The burden of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) in the United Kingdom', https://www.healthdata.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/United_Kingdom.pdf.
88 McDonnell, A. et al. (2024), *Forecasting the Fallout from AMR: Economic Impacts of Antimicrobial Resistance in Humans*, EcoAMR series report, Center for Global Development, World Organisation for Animal Health and World Bank, https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/forecasting-fallout-amr-economic-impacts-antimicrobial-resistance-humans.pdf.
89 Bhutto, F. (2021), 'The world's richest countries are hoarding vaccines. This is morally indefensible', *Guardian*, 17 March 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/17/rich-countries-hoarding-vaccines-us-eu-africa.

caused by promoting its own 'Health Silk Road' and Global Development Initiative as alternatives to Western development models. As part of a 'vaccine diplomacy' strategy, China provided its COVID-19 vaccine free to 53 countries between 2021 and 2022, although delays and its own 'Zero COVID' strategy led to mixed results for China's reputation and soft power.[90] In February 2025, China (alongside South Korea) donated $4 million to the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention to help address immediate health funding gaps in the aftermath of USAID cuts.[91] Such initiatives are modest compared with OECD programmes and cannot fill the global ODA funding gap, but they demonstrate the degree to which China seeks to use global health and aid for its own soft power projection.

Broader security consequences

This chapter has focused on conflict, instability and the provision of global public goods as examples of areas in which ODA cuts have security implications. In particular, we have focused on health security as an example of a global public good threatened by aid cuts. However, there are also implications for other global public goods – including for efforts to address transnational security challenges around climate change, illicit finance, human trafficking, and serious and organized crime, which are all relevant to the UK.

As discussed throughout this paper, the multilateral system, which has been critical to the provision of global public goods, has come under sustained political and financial pressure in recent years. The ODA cuts add to this. Similar pressures to those undermining health security systems are bearing down on some of the institutions and processes charged with strengthening climate security, for example, and this poses tangible risks to UK food security, ecosystems and the economy.[92] Similarly, research interviews for this paper highlighted the broader impact of the cuts in terms of addressing weapons-related contamination (e.g. demining operations or clearing biological chemicals), commitments to international humanitarian law, and funding for organizations responding to forced labour and trafficking in the UK. These issues highlight the broader implications of aid cuts, and offer avenues for future research and discussion.

90 Leigh, M. (2021), 'Vaccine diplomacy: soft power lessons from China and Russia?', Bruegel Blog, 27 April 2021, https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/vaccine-diplomacy-soft-power-lessons-china-and-russia.
91 Kew, J. (2025), 'China, South Korea Sent $4 Million to Africa CDC as US Exits', Bloomberg, 20 February 2025, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-02-20/china-korea-sent-4-million-to-africa-cdc-after-trump-s-exit.
92 Harvey, F. and Horton, H. (2025), 'National security threatened by climate crisis, UK defence chiefs warn', *Guardian*, 8 October 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/08/national-security-threatened-climate-crisis-uk-defence-chiefs-warn.

04 Geopolitical consequences of ODA cuts

Global aid cuts reinforce perceptions that Western democracies are becoming less reliable partners. China and others are seeking to exploit this narrative. The UK will need to build more strategic and mutually beneficial relationships with developing countries to sustain its influence and counterbalance these trends.

Development assistance has always been geopolitical. Throughout the Cold War, aid was frequently linked to security alliances, economic interests and spheres of influence. While the post-Cold War period appeared to mark a shift towards greater multilateral coordination around the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and then the SDGs, aid continued to be tied to strategic objectives, such as migration control, counterterrorism, market access and donors' broader security interests.[93] In other words, given a history of geopolitically charged and securitized aid flows, the current ODA cuts indicate the West's withdrawal from one of the principal instruments it has used to project influence and build relationships with developing countries.

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93 For example, Keen, D. and Andersson, R. (2018), 'Double games: Success, failure and the relocation of risk in fighting terror, drugs and migration', *Political Geography*, 67, pp. 100–10, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.09.008; Berthelemy, J.-C. (2006), 'Bilateral Donors' Interests vs. Recipients' Development Motives in Aid Allocation: Do All Donors Behave the Same?', *Review of Development Economics*, 10(2), pp. 179–94, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9361.2006.00311.x.

However, while that shift is significant in itself, there are broader consequences for the UK in terms of how the cuts intersect with emerging-power agendas, weakened multilateralism and a less reliable US. New or emerging actors are becoming more dominant and influential when it comes to aid and related activities aimed at Global South countries. These actors include China, Russia, the Gulf states and Turkey. At the same time, increased challenges to multilateral coordination raise questions about how the UK and other allies can continue to manage aid relationships effectively.

The rise of emerging powers in global aid

Over the past two decades, emerging powers such as Brazil, China, the Gulf states, India, Mexico, Russia and Turkey have deepened their engagement with developing countries, reflecting an increasingly multipolar global order.[94] Both as a response to the collective call for action represented by the MDGs and SDGs and to advance their own interests and influence (like Western donors), these actors have invested in development programmes, humanitarian response and conflict mediation. But their approaches to development are heterogeneous, can differ significantly from the OECD DAC-defined ODA model, and sometimes challenge its accepted tenets.[95] For instance, alongside grant-based aid, these actors make extensive use of loans, guarantees, infrastructure investment, credits and other financial instruments.[96] Their definitions of (and budgets for) overseas 'assistance' can also include security-focused activities and military support, particularly where Russia or China is involved as a donor.[97]

In some cases, non-traditional aid models offer more flexible or politically palatable engagement for partner countries. The growing role of such assistance has therefore prompted debate about whether these actors could ultimately replace donors such as the US, the UK and other European states in response to the recent global ODA cuts.

But because these models often use different instruments and serve diverse objectives, they are unlikely to substitute for Western programmes.[98] The new models are not set up to fund large-scale health, humanitarian or climate initiatives in the way that ODA traditionally has. Instead, their models reflect a logic more explicitly oriented towards mutual benefit and state-to-state negotiation than is the case with traditional donor–recipient relations.

However, even if emerging actors do not 'fill the gaps' left by Western retrenchment, the ODA cuts will have geopolitical consequences. Aid reductions create openings for other states to expand their influence, promote development models that reflect their own priorities and programme styles, and shift the balance of power within

94 Mersie, A. (2025), 'From China to the Gulf: The donors reshaping global development', Devex, 27 August 2025, https://www.devex.com/news/from-china-to-the-gulf-the-donors-reshaping-global-development-110697.
95 Regilme, S. and Hodzi, O. (2021), 'Comparing US and Chinese Foreign Aid in the Era of Rising Powers', *The International Spectator*, 56(2), pp. 114–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1855904.
96 Dollar, D. (2018), 'Is China's Development Finance a Challenge to the International Order?', *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 13(2), pp. 283–98, https://doi.org/10.1111/aepr.12229.
97 Regilme and Hodzi (2021), 'Comparing US and Chinese Foreign Aid in the Era of Rising Powers'.
98 Sun, Y. (2025), 'Can China fill the void in foreign aid?', Brookings, 11 March 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/can-china-fill-the-void-in-foreign-aid.

multilateral institutions. To be clear, Western donors have frequently adopted this strategy in their *own* use of ODA in certain contexts. This includes securitized 'hearts and minds' interventions in Afghanistan,[99] and the tying of aid to migration control and border enforcement across Europe's peripheries.[100] The growing foreign aid role of emerging powers also affects how responses to global challenges are governed, including on digital standards, climate negotiations, developing-country debt and global trade,[101] where interests sometimes converge with but often diverge from those of the UK.

China

China's growing role in international development in recent decades has raised concerns in some foreign ministries – particularly in Western governments – that the ODA cuts create opportunities for the country to expand its influence across the Global South at the expense of OECD DAC donors. This reflects a long-standing anxiety in Western policy discourse that China's development model, which often prioritizes large-scale infrastructure projects, is primarily directed towards strategic, rather than developmental, objectives.

The Belt and Road Initiative has altered perceptions of China as a systemic development actor and led Western donors to view development more explicitly as an arena for strategic competition with China.

Critics suggest that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has created a network of dependency-based relationships through 'debt-trap diplomacy' and control of supply chains for low-carbon technologies and processed rare earths.[102] Evidence for this claim is mixed, however: while the BRI mobilized large volumes of capital at its peak, its scale has diminished substantially in recent years;[103] today, China's engagement is increasingly framed around the more multilaterally oriented Global Development Initiative, which China launched in 2021.[104] Regardless of true on-the-ground conditions, however, the BRI has altered perceptions of China as a systemic development actor and led Western donors to view development more explicitly as an arena for strategic competition with China.

99 Gordon, S. (2011), *Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan's Helmand Province*, Feinstein International Center at Tufts University, April 2011, https://fic.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/WinningHearts-Helmand.pdf.
100 Leigh (2021), 'Vaccine diplomacy: soft power lessons from China and Russia?'.
101 Interviews with several experts on China, development and international security, August–September 2025.
102 Bhattacharya, A. et al. (2019), 'China's Belt and Road: The new geopolitics of global infrastructure development', Brookings, April 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-belt-and-road-the-new-geopolitics-of-global-infrastructure-development.
103 Gunter, J. (2023), 'Don't count on China's Belt and Road Initiative to disappear', MERICS, 1 November 2023, https://merics.org/en/comment/dont-count-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-disappear.
104 Wu, L. (2023), 'China's Transition From the Belt and Road to the Global Development Initiative', *The Diplomat*, https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/chinas-switch-from-the-belt-and-road-to-the-global-development-initiative.

For example, G7 states have increasingly framed some development initiatives as a counter to China.[105] The EU's Global Gateway Initiative was launched in 2021 to mobilize investment in digital connectivity, energy and transport,[106] while the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (2023) pledged to mobilize 'up to USD 600 billion by 2027' for strategic projects across the Global South.[107] But these efforts have faced persistent challenges, including low levels of capital mobilization and coordination problems due to fractures within the G7 alliance,[108] which have further contributed to perceptions that Western donors are unreliable.

Against this backdrop, concerns have grown in some countries that the recent ODA cuts provide China with the opportunity to step into positions of leadership left by OECD DAC donors. But while China has responded in some areas – for example, it has provided $4 million in partnership with South Korea to the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention[109] (see also Chapter 3) and briefly provided $4.4 million to fund demining in Cambodia after the US temporarily paused operations[110] – these sums are only a fraction of what the US provided and are largely symbolic. In other words, there is no indication that China is seeking to comprehensively fill the funding gaps left by Western donors or replicate their programmes at scale.

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There are several reasons for this. First, China's development budgets are planned years in advance, and its bureaucracy is not designed to adjust rapidly, for example in response to OECD DAC members' ODA spending cuts. Second, political constraints within China preclude it from mobilizing significant amounts of capital for overseas development. Given enduring poverty within China, citizens oppose spending on such development rather than on domestic priorities.[111] Third, and most importantly, China's model of engaging the Global South – including on development – is different to the approach of DAC states. Rather than primarily

105 Simonov, M. (2025), 'The Belt and Road Initiative and Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment: Comparison and current status', *Asia and the Global Economy*, 5(1), p. 100106, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aglobe.2025.100106.
106 Garcia-Herrero, A. (2024), 'David and Goliath: The EU's Global Gateway versus China's Belt and Road Initiative', Bruegel, 16 December 2024, https://www.bruegel.org/newsletter/david-and-goliath-eus-global-gateway-versus-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative.
107 European Commission (undated), 'EU contribution to the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment', https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/eu-contribution-partnership-global-infrastructure-and-investment_en.
108 Arun, A. (2024), *What Private Capital Cannot Do Alone: The Future of Global Infrastructure Development*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 December 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/12/what-private-capital-cannot-do-alone-the-future-of-global-infrastructure-development?lang=en.
109 Kew (2025), 'China, South Korea Sent $4 Million to Africa CDC as US Exits'.
110 Datta, S. (2025), 'From Democracy to Diplomacy: The New U.S. Strategy in Cambodia Post-USAID', CSIS Blogs, 11 March 2025, https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/democracy-diplomacy-new-us-strategy-cambodia-post-usaid.
111 Wang, H. and Cooper, A. F. (2022), 'Public Opinion on Chinese Foreign Aid Policy: Calculated Opposition or General Discontent?', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 32(141), pp. 455–72, https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2090101.

providing concessional grants, China's engagement model prioritizes concessional and non-concessional loans, infrastructure projects and state-backed investment, often tied to Chinese contractors.[112] These forms of support do not neatly map onto the areas most affected by the ODA cuts, such as global health, conflict response or some types of climate action. Likewise, China prefers to engage directly with states rather than NGOs or some multilateral agencies, meaning it bypasses many of the actors facing the most severe shortages of funding.[113]

As a result, the geopolitical implications for the UK are not that China will *replace* DAC programmes on a like-for-like basis.[114] Instead, the risk is that the cuts leave significant financing gaps in critical areas like health, while creating opportunities for China to shape the narrative in ways that are politically beneficial to China. For instance, China has sought to amplify and leverage sentiment, across the Global South, that regards the existing international order as unjust and as predominantly benefiting Western states.[115] This narrative gathered force and legitimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the inequitable distribution of vaccines and their stockpiling among Western states underscored grievances with the prevailing international system.[116] China has sought to present itself as a 'voice' of the Global South and as a more reliable partner than Western democracies. China highlights its engagement with developing countries as South–South cooperation, avoids framing relationships in the language of 'aid', and portrays itself as an equal partner rather than a donor.[117] For many developing countries, this framing, coupled with limited political conditionality on China's part, can be more attractive than traditional ODA models.

Yet, while this approach does resonate politically, it can also mask new forms of dependency and geopolitical manoeuvring, for instance through debt or geopolitical alignment under the 'One China' policy, which asserts that Taiwan is under the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China.[118] For example, Anke Hoeffler and Olivier Sterck find that African countries that formally recognize Taiwan receive significantly less aid from China than those that refuse to recognize Taiwan, and that recognition/non-recognition of Taiwan is the strongest factor shaping China's decision-making on aid.[119] In other words, China's aid is closely tied to its geopolitical strategy and objectives.

To be sure, China's strategy faces constraints – not least from arguments that China's export-led economic model is antithetical to the interests of other Global South actors due to its impact on the competitiveness of their markets, and that

112 Harchaoui, T. M., Maseland, R. K. and Watkinson, J. A. (2021), 'Carving Out an Empire? How China Strategically Uses Aid to Facilitate Chinese Business Expansion in Africa', *Journal of African Economies*, 30(2), pp. 183–205, https://doi.org/10.1093/jae/ejaa006.
113 Tugendhat, H. and Palmer, J. (2025), 'Can China Replace USAID?', *Foreign Policy*, 7 July 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/07/07/usaid-china-trump-xi-jinping-foreign-aid-welfare.
114 This should not come as a surprise. China aims to reform rather than reproduce the prevailing global order to better reflect Chinese priorities and interests.
115 Klingebiel, S. (2023), 'Geopolitics, the Global South and development policy', German Institute of Development and Sustainability, policy brief no. 14, https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb14.2023.
116 Conradie, F. (2021), '"Vaccine Apartheid" and Western Influence in Africa', Oxford Economics blog, 21 September 2021, https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/resource/vaccine-apartheid-and-western-influence-in-africa.
117 Tugendhat and Palmer (2025), 'Can China Replace USAID?'.
118 Regilme and Hodzi (2021), 'Comparing US and Chinese Foreign Aid in the Era of Rising Powers'.
119 Hoeffler, A. and Sterck, O. (2022), 'Is Chinese aid different?', *World Development*, Vol. 156: 105908, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X22000985.

the BRI proliferated unsustainable debt relationships.[120] More importantly, many developing states are pursuing a steadfast strategy of non- or multi-alignment,[121] which is relatively unaffected either by ODA flows or by China's rhetoric. As a result, rather than obtain hegemonic influence, China is one voice, albeit an increasingly powerful one, claiming to champion Global South interests.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of the West, Beijing's promotion of the idea that Western democracies are unreliable and hypocritical development partners confers geopolitical benefits on China. This comes at a time when China is already the most important trading partner for around 30 African countries, and when the multilateral initiatives[122] it is establishing to bypass and counter Western influence are framed as empowering developing countries.

Therefore, the effects of Western retrenchment could play into China's broader geopolitical strategy, even if China does not significantly increase its own development spending or seek to fill funding gaps. This means the UK will face greater difficulty positioning itself as a dependable partner, defending multilateral institutions in which it has traditionally exercised influence, and shaping global governance.

Russia

Russia makes very limited investments in development. While official statistics are not published, the World Bank estimates that between 2004 and 2017 Russia's ODA contributions rose from around $100 million to $1.2 billion.[123] This is not insignificant but is modest compared with the amounts of funding from Western donors. More importantly, Russia prefers to engage developing countries through bilateral security assistance, energy partnerships and regime-to-regime linkages.[124] This often includes arms sales coupled with security forces training, food and fuel subsidies, or debt relief.[125]

While these measures can strengthen regime security in recipient states, they rarely confer welfare benefits to society and can be detrimental to development objectives. Nevertheless, in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, this model has allowed Russia to sustain influence at relatively low financial cost.

Our interviewees for this paper highlighted that – as with China – while the drop in global ODA does not pose a geopolitical risk to the West in terms of empowering Russia's limited developmental activities, the cuts do create opportunities for Moscow to expand its geopolitical influence and exploit anti-Western sentiment. By presenting itself as a partner that imposes few political conditions on

120 Lubin, D. (2025), *Will economic policy win China friends in the Global South?*, Briefing Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/09/will-economic-policy-win-china-friends-global-south/summary.
121 Klingebiel (2023), 'Geopolitics, the Global South and development policy'.
122 Specifically, the Global Civilization Initiative, Global Security Initiative, Global Development Initiative and Global Governance Initiative.
123 World Bank (undated), 'Russia and the World Bank: International Development Assistance', https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia/brief/international-development.
124 European Parliament (2024), *Russia in Africa: An Atlas*, European Parliament Research Service, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/757654/EPRS_BRI(2024)757654_EN.pdf.
125 Reuters (2023), 'Putin to BRICS: Russia is 'reliable partner' for Africa on food, fuel supplies', 24 August 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-brics-russia-is-reliable-partner-africa-food-fuel-supplies-2023-08-24.

aid recipients, Russia appeals to governments wary of Western support tied to improvements in governance or human rights.[126] In some cases, Russia's engagement strengthens authoritarian regimes and opposition to democratic norms, in direct competition with the UK's stated interests in promoting a rules-based international order.[127] Like China, Russia has sought to capitalize on criticism of the unreliability and double standards of Western democracies, and the country has stepped into contexts where Western influence has waned, such as the Sahel and the Balkans. While Russia does not necessarily command sustained influence over developing countries, their non-alignment or multi-alignment has benefited Russia in key UN votes, including on Ukraine.[128]

The Gulf, Turkey and other emerging powers

Alongside China, a wider set of emerging powers such as India, Turkey and the Gulf states – notably Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – have become more active in international development over the past two decades.[129] Turkey's aid agency, TIKA, has expanded rapidly since the early 2000s, while the Gulf states have played an increasingly important role in humanitarian assistance and concessional lending. As with other donors, the assistance of these emerging powers is often tied to strategic objectives, such as consolidating influence in the Horn of Africa, Yemen and Sudan, albeit with varying degrees of success.[130]

Closer cooperation between the UK and emerging powers will likely reinforce the existing trend of sidelining human rights and democratization agendas in development engagement.

Similarly to China, these actors are not positioned to replace Western ODA in areas like global health: spending is often concentrated geographically and delivered through a mix of formal and informal channels.[131] Nevertheless, in the context of these actors' growing role, the global ODA cuts create geopolitical opportunities and risks for the UK. DAC donors, including the UK, have already increased cooperation with Gulf donors, particularly on pooled humanitarian funding.[132] Given fiscal constraints across Europe, including in the UK, interviewees highlighted that

126 Sabanadze, N. (2024), 'Russia is using the Soviet playbook in the Global South to challenge the West – and it is working', Chatham House Expert Comment, 16 May 2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/05/russia-using-soviet-playbook-global-south-challenge-west-and-it-working.
127 Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), *Tracking Russian Interference to Derail Democracy in Africa*, 8 May 2024, https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Russian-Interference.pdf.
128 Alden, C. (2023), 'The Global South and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', *LSE Public Policy Review*, 3(1), https://ppr.lse.ac.uk/articles/10.31389/lseppr.88.
129 Elkahlout, G. and Milton, S. (2023), 'The evolution of the Gulf states as humanitarian donors', *Third World Quarterly*, 45(15–16), pp. 2246–2265, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2229742.
130 Yaghi, M., Almoaibed, H. and Colombo, S. (2024), 'Foreign aid of Gulf States: continuity and change', *Third World Quarterly*, 45(15-16), pp. 2145–2154, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2431294.
131 Interviews with various development experts and practitioners, August–September 2025.
132 FCDO (2024), 'UK and Qatar double joint humanitarian funding to £79.4 million to tackle crises around the world', press release, 3 December 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-qatar-double-joint-humanitarian-funding-to-794-million-to-tackle-crises-around-the-world.

this cooperation is likely to deepen and gain impetus, with these partners playing a more significant role in setting development agendas. This has the potential to bring benefits in terms of resources, shared expertise and geographic reach, but it may also create tensions in areas where interests diverge. For example, the Gulf states remain heavily invested in fossil fuels even while promoting green energy initiatives,[133] and their engagement in conflict can frustrate Western diplomatic objectives, such as in Sudan.[134] Moreover, closer cooperation between the UK and emerging powers will likely reinforce the existing trend of sidelining human rights and democratization agendas in development engagement. For the UK, cooperation with emerging donors such as the Gulf states can create opportunities to broaden its approach to development partnerships, but this will create challenges to its geopolitical interests in governance, conflict prevention/response and climate action.

Multilateralism and coordination with allies

In addition to financing development programmes, ODA has long underpinned multilateralism itself as a means of ordering geopolitical affairs. For example, in 2019 some $75.6 billion in ODA – almost half the total – flowed to or through multilateral organizations.[135] A significant fraction of these flows consists of core funding, which not only supports action on underfunded crises but also pays operational costs to enable the ongoing existence of the institutions and agencies themselves.[136] As such, alongside creating openings for emerging powers, the ODA cuts weaken the multilateral architecture that has historically provided the UK with privileged influence, convening power and a role in global agenda-setting.

ODA cuts weaken the multilateral architecture that has historically provided the UK with privileged influence, convening power and a role in global agenda-setting.

To be clear, the recent round of ODA cuts is not the primary cause of a weakened multilateral system – this is better attributed to the systemic rivalry between the US and China, and Russia's escalation of violence. But the ODA cuts compound existing pressures in several ways. First, they directly reduce the resources available to key multilateral agencies, undermining their ability to respond to global challenges. Second, the cuts exacerbate budgeting uncertainty and complicate

133 Al-Sarihi, A. (2025), 'What does the COP29 finance agreement mean for the Gulf countries?', Chatham House Kalam, 20 January 2025, https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/what-does-the-cop29-finance-agreement-mean-for-the-gulf-countries.
134 Donelli, F. (2025), 'Sudan's Civil War and the Gulf Chessboard', Italian Institute for International Political Studies, commentary, 30 April 2025, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/sudans-civil-war-and-the-gulf-chessboard-207431.
135 OECD (2021), 'Partnering with the Multilateral System: Development Cooperation Fundamentals', https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2021/03/development-co-operation-tips-tools-insights-practices_d307b396/partnering-with-the-multilateral-system_72629d0f/ebed4316-en.pdf.
136 Gulrajani, N. and Lundsgaarde, E. (2023), 'Finding common ground for financing multilateral institutions: assessing options for mobilising core finance', ODI Global, 22 November 2023, https://odi.org/en/insights/finding-common-ground-for-financing-multilateral-institutions-assessing-options-for-mobilising-core-finance.

multi-year planning; this poses challenges in areas where predictability is important, such as global health security and conflict response. Third, reduced ODA undermines the capacity of multilateral institutions to play a part in shaping norms, which have often reflected Western preferences.[137] For the UK, this diminishes the government's ability to project influence through the multilateral system.

In the US, the ODA cuts also coincide with 'an explicitly anti-multilateralist policy rooted in national sovereignty, geopolitical calculation, and transactional economics',[138] which accompanies the country's broader 'America First' programme. Interviewees emphasized that this both reinforces the perception that Western democracies are unreliable and undermines a more coordinated approach among G7 states. For example, interviewees highlighted that, for many small island states in the Pacific, the US's ODA cuts and aggressive use of tariffs have created confusion about US policy goals and exacerbated the perception that democracies are increasingly inconsistent.

For the UK, this creates further difficulties in coordinating with allies on development issues. While G7 countries have not adopted a common position on development and themselves pursue divergent agendas, the US's shift to a more nationalist and bilateral model undermines efforts to organize one. This contributes to a more fragmented, competitive and transactional environment that does not play to the UK's strengths and risks diminishing the UK's global influence. In this context, the UK and other middle powers should focus less on replicating the scale of US or Chinese aid financing and instead work towards building coalitions and coordination mechanisms to promote coherence, transparency and predictability in development. The next chapter considers this challenge in more detail.

137 Antoniades, A. (2003), 'Epistemic Communities, Epistemes and the Construction of (World) Politics', *Global Society*, 17(1), pp. 21–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/0953732032000053980.
138 Klingebiel, S. and Sumner, A. (2025), 'Foreign Aid, Power, and Geopolitics: Reflections on Development Cooperation in a More Fragmented World', *Global Policy*, 3 August 2025, https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/03/08/2025/foreign-aid-power-and-geopolitics-reflections-development-cooperaton-more.

05 Conclusion and recommendations

The UK will have to work with other partners to manage the security and geopolitical consequences of both its own aid cuts and the decline in global ODA. With funding unlikely to return, this will mean sustained engagement with middle powers and developing countries to navigate a fractured international system.

Current spending figures suggest that the UK, in planning to cut aid from 0.5 per cent of GNI to 0.3 per cent of GNI by 2027, has sought to preserve funding for key multilateral contributions, for responses to some priority conflicts, and for cooperation with strategic emerging powers. However, this has come at the expense of bilateral spending on some countries and regions, reflected in a 12 per cent overall cut in bilateral spending on Africa, a 21 per cent cut in bilateral spending on the Middle East and North Africa, and cuts to bilateral aid for highly conflict-affected countries that include Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Syria.[139]

A strategy of seeking to preserve some key multilateral funding is logical in the wider context of reduced global aid funding and increased strains on the international system. And with its own spending reduced, the UK may be able to have more effect – including in some of the contexts where it has cut bilateral aid – by maintaining funding to international financial institutions and humanitarian agencies, which can deliver impact at scale in a way UK funding alone would not be able to.

139 Cohrs, L. (2025), 'FCDO Annual Report 2025 paints a bleak picture for the communities who need the most help', Bond, 24 July 2025, https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2025/07/fcdo-annual-report-2025-paints-a-bleak-picture-for-the-communities-who-need-the-most-help.

But this strategy – of prioritizing multilateral funding in straitened times – requires an effective multilateral system. Given the wider global aid cuts and the US's increasing withdrawal from some multilateral forums, this means that international financial institutions, UN agencies and development banks are all under significant budget pressure. And, of course, not all problems stem from the recent cuts. The multilateral system has well-documented problems with bureaucracy and gridlock. There is a proliferation of agencies and initiatives. World Bank and other analyses find the number of organizations, projects and new initiatives in international development has increased dramatically: for example, the number of donor agencies – i.e. organizations providing funds or resources – went from 227 in 2004–08 to 608 in 2019–23, while the average size of individual grants declined between 2000 and 2023.[140]

The priority should be a slimmed down, more effective international system, but also one where the UK is influential and plays to its strengths.

The recent aid cuts add to the risk that each of these agencies and projects will individually struggle to fill gaps or work coherently together, or that they will compete with one another to preserve dwindling funds to survive. The priority should be a slimmed down, more effective international system, but also one where the UK is influential and plays to its strengths. This requires investment beyond money – in time, diplomatic influence and in shaping an international institutional system that is changing. The UK is in a good position to work with other donors to advocate for consolidating and simplifying the international system for aid and global public goods – and to take the recent cuts as a moment to do this with a focus on preserving funding for the most urgent and critical needs. The mooted 'Future of Aid' summit, which the UK government is considering holding in 2026, would be a welcome moment to galvanize efforts on this, and to build coalitions with developing countries and middle-power donors – such as Australia, Canada, the European states and Japan – with which the UK shares an interest in building a functioning multilateral system in a less American world.[141]

But UK spending cuts and the overall reduction in aid will nonetheless affect the UK's bilateral relationships with key states in the Global South. For some, direct aid provision is becoming less important already – economies like Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, which have achieved lower-middle- or upper-middle-income status, may well be able to weather some of the global aid cuts. In fact, some analysts argue, the cuts may put pressure on these and other states to do more to mobilize

140 World Bank (undated), 'Defragmenting the Global Aid Architecture: A New Playbook for Development Impact', https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2025/07/17/ida-s-role-in-aid-architecture; Prizzon, A. (2021), 'Virtual roundtable 'A Changing Landscape: Trends in Official Financial Flows and the Aid Architecture – A World Bank Report' Summary', ODI Global, 5 November 2021, https://odi.org/en/publications/virtual-roundtable-a-changing-landscape-trends-in-official-financial-flows-and-the-aid-architecture-a-world-bank-report-summary.
141 Wintour, P. (2025), ''Conversation on future of aid long overdue': UK looks to lead response to swingeing US cuts', *Guardian*, 7 May 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/may/07/conversation-on-future-of-aid-long-overdue-uk-looks-to-lead-response-to-swingeing-us-cuts.

their own public finances for healthcare and other basic service provision.[142] But, precisely as many of its Global South partners are becoming wealthier, more regionally influential and more significant in geopolitical competition, the UK has all the more reason to prioritize relations with them.

Now is an opportune time for the UK to do so with tools beyond aid – particularly as competitor states such as China consolidate their influence in these regions. Attempts to counter this influence have often been piecemeal, and this might be a good moment for the UK to consider working with European allies to make a combined and refreshed offer to developing countries in light of the impacts of US tariffs, global aid cuts, weakened multilateralism and some aspects of China's macroeconomic policies. Such an offer should focus on wider tools than aid spending: particularly, expanding preferential trade access for developing countries (ideally, in concert with other G7 allies), restructuring the governance of debt relief, and advancing shared approaches to global challenges. The aim should be to signal that Western engagement remains credible and mutually beneficial, even as traditional aid flows decline.

Nonetheless, the risk remains that the poorest states in the world – most of which are fragile or conflict-affected – are left behind as a result of cuts and new funding patterns. This is having, and will have, significant human consequences, especially for the provision of basic healthcare, emergency food aid and humanitarian relief. It could also have long-term effects on regional and global security if conflicts are neglected. The UK government should consider ways to maintain expertise and focus on these states even in the absence of higher funding, including via the current restructuring process at the FCDO.

Furthermore, the UK should review where additional funding could be allocated to these states in accordance with the wider themes of conflict prevention, conflict response and peacebuilding. Growing security threats have made higher defence spending unavoidable, marking a shift from the 2000s and 2010s when UK aid spending was at its peak. The new NATO target for defence spending to hit 5 per cent of GDP by 2035 is divided into two components: 3.5 per cent of GDP on 'hard' defence, and 1.5 per cent on wider security and resilience spending. As argued in this paper, security – particularly the ability to manage the risk of regional conflicts spilling over and affecting global stability – is about more than just military spending.

There is an obvious risk that the 1.5 per cent component of the target will be diluted by multiple claims that any cherished priority fits the bill of 'security and resilience' spending. But in a world in which global aid spending is set to decline by over $60 billion in 2023–26, and in which fragile states are likely to become areas of worsening poverty and conflict, there is still a case for ringfencing some spending for conflict prevention and stabilization. This could include for channels such as the UK Integrated Security Fund, a cross-government fund established in 2023 to address and prevent conflict and volatility using aid funding, and to ensure the UK government retains networks, influence and expertise in priority states.[143] Additionally, it is imperative that new defence spending contributes effectively

142 Opalo (2025), 'Why ending aid dependency is an opportunity for African countries'.
143 HM Government (2023), 'New fund announced to support UK's national security priorities', 13 March 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-fund-announced-to-support-uks-national-security-priorities.

to UK security; this requires effective scrutiny of that spending, including better and more consistent accountability to parliament, and possibly a stronger role for independent monitoring, as indeed is already the case for UK aid spending.[144]

Finally, and as argued throughout this paper, it is in the UK's national interest to deepen strategic engagement with countries across the Global South. Developing economies are increasingly important for global governance, economic growth and technological development: the world's economic centre of gravity has shifted steadily eastward over recent decades – a trend that is expected to continue well into the rest of this century.[145] Many emerging powers and developing states are also adopting strategies of multi- or non-alignment, contributing to a more competitive geopolitical environment but also underscoring the need to build mutually beneficial, and sometimes transactional, partnerships. In this context, the UK cannot manage its security and geopolitical influence through a foreign policy focused solely on major powers. Instead, the UK will need to cultivate credible and strategic relationships with a broad range of developing countries that are reshaping the global order.

For the UK, there are limits to what it can do on its own to address wider risks from the global aid cuts, but there are options for working with other partners to mitigate these risks. These options are summarized below:

Work with like-minded European allies, especially the EU, France and Germany, to make a clearer offer of partnership that goes beyond aid – including closer trade, institutional and research ties – to states in the Global South.

- The British government should capitalize on its ongoing UK–EU reset. A joint statement from the May 2025 UK–EU summit acknowledged the opportunity for the UK and EU to work more closely on development and humanitarian efforts.[146] The EU, France, Germany and other key European donors, such as Norway and Switzerland, are particularly important given their historic provision of ODA and technical expertise. The UK should consider establishing a series of track 1.5 meetings with EU officials with the aim of building on mutual interests with developing countries in ensuring stability, promoting predictable economic and trade governance, and developing shared responses to global challenges. This could be patterned after similar dialogues taking place on economic security, defence and resilience.
- UK cooperation with Europe could also focus on strengthening preferential trade access for developing countries – particularly as a counter to US tariffs, and with other non-aid support including targeted investments and collaborative research partnerships. Cooperation could build on mechanisms such as the UK's

144 House of Commons Defence Committee (2023), 'It is broke – and it's time to fix it: The UK's defence procurement system – Report Summary', 16 July 2023, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmdfence/1099/summary.html; Independent Commission for Aid Impact (2025), 'About Us', https://icai.independent.gov.uk/about-us (accessed 30 Oct. 2025).
145 Puri, S. (2024), *Westlessness: The Great Global Rebalancing*, London: Hodder & Stoughton.
146 UK Government (2025), 'UK–EU Summit 2025 – Joint Statement', 19 May 2025, paragraphs 3 and 21, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/682afb528999f671f3c243d6/UK_EU_Summit_-_Joint_Statement.pdf.

Developing Countries Trading Scheme,[147] and on partnerships through the UK's Science and Innovation Network, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and Horizon Europe.

— Cooperation should also prioritize reforming governance of debt restructuring and debt relief, and should look to make international financial institutions more responsive to Global South priorities. These goals are consistent with existing UK policy positions, but require sustained political momentum and coordination with European partners to be credible – particularly on engagement with private creditors.

Work with middle powers to prioritize goals within the multilateral system and address 'aid fragmentation'. The UK, like-minded middle powers and several emerging powers have a mutual interest in upholding a functioning international system, and have stronger economic and political means to do so when acting together.

— The UK could work with a coalition of like-minded donors (e.g. Australia, Canada, the EU and Japan) to respond to the immediate ODA cuts and address 'aid fragmentation' at the international level – i.e. the proliferation of duplicative agencies and siloed funding flows.[148] The UK and allied donors maintain influence in the multilateral system, particularly humanitarian and development agencies, and this can be leveraged to enact reform. Policies are needed to rationalize multilateral programmes, minimize duplication and prioritize the most critical global public goods – particularly in health and humanitarian response.

— Work in the above areas could be pursued through the proposed 2026 'Future of Aid' summit – positioning it as a forum to clarify shared objectives and provide strategic direction to global development – and continued via more established forums including the G20.[149] Developing countries and representatives of locally led organizations in those countries should have a leading voice in such an initiative, given that they will be most immediately affected by its consequences and will likely play a central role in future partnerships.

— The UK government should engage middle powers to mitigate the destabilizing effects of erratic US foreign policy and sustain the delivery of global public goods such as health security. The UK should deepen structured policy dialogue with Australia, Canada, the Gulf states, India and Japan to identify where US withdrawal from the international system has created the most acute shortfalls in delivery of global public goods. Such discussions could focus on coordinating mitigation measures, whether through joint funding or multilateral institutions. Forums like the G20 could be valuable platforms for this. Equally, a useful template could be the success of ad hoc coalitions formed to address specific issues, where traditional multilateral formats have stalled;

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147 Department for Business and Trade and FCDO (2023), 'Developing Countries Trading Scheme (DCTS)', 19 June 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/trading-with-developing-nations.
148 World Bank (undated), 'Defragmenting the Global Aid Architecture: A New Playbook for Development Impact'; Prizzon (2021), 'Virtual roundtable 'A Changing Landscape: Trends in Official Financial Flows and the Aid Architecture – A World Bank Report' Summary'.
149 Wintour (2025), ''Conversation on future of aid long overdue': UK looks to lead response to swingeing US cuts'.

these successes have included Unitaid and the High Ambition Coalition, which were backed by Brazil, Chile, France, Norway and the UK to fund HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria responses via non-ODA channels.[150]

— The UK and selected allies should champion reforms to improve predictability, transparency and accountability in multilateral funding. This could include reducing the use of intermediaries and supporting locally led initiatives, as well as setting clearer, more predictable benchmarks for multi-year funding. Work could be patterned on previous exercises such as the DFID Multilateral Aid Reviews (2011 and 2015), which systematically assessed the effectiveness of institutions and prioritized funding to them accordingly.[151] This aligns with statements by the UK's minister for international development, Baroness Chapman, on strengthening multilateral institutions while investing in locally led responses.[152]

Preserve expertise, resources and focus in government on fragile and conflict-affected countries.

— The UK should reinforce and preserve specialist expertise within the FCDO on conflict, mediation, peacebuilding, health security and post-conflict recovery, so that the UK can maintain capacity in these areas. Ongoing restructuring at the FCDO risks further eroding specialist capacity and expertise that are essential for recognizing and addressing the drivers of instability in priority regions (and for understanding and articulating their relevance to UK national security).

— Managing relations with major powers, particularly the US, the EU and China, is understandably absorbing significant government attention, spread across the FCDO but also the Cabinet Office and No. 10. The government should preserve a focus in the FCDO on long-term engagement with the Global South and conflict-affected states. This would ensure the UK can consistently build relations with countries that will become more powerful in future. It would also enable the FCDO to sustain long-term understanding and networks in fragile settings, mitigate against the risk of neglect, and build on ambitions set since the DFID/FCO merger in terms of integrating foreign and development policy.

— A central government assessment is needed of the security impacts of global and UK aid cuts. Such an exercise could potentially be led by national security teams in the Cabinet Office, with input from the FCDO and other departments. Additional external research tracking and assessing the implications of the cuts as highlighted in this paper, including for illicit finance, conflict risks, global public goods and geopolitical relations, would also be welcome.

150 Ishmael, L., Klingebiel, S. and Sumner, A. (2025), 'In search of a Plan B: The Future of Global Development lies in "Like-Minded Internationalism"', Global Policy Blog, 22 May 2025, https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/22/05/2025/search-plan-b-future-global-development-lies-minded-internationalism.
151 Department for International Development (2015), 'Multilateral Aid Review', 25 September 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/multilateral-aid-review.
152 House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (2025), 'UK Aid: response of the UK Government to the Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2023–24', HC 1183, 13 October 2025, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/49697/documents/266276/default.

- The UK government should explore whether elements of its resilience-focused defence spending should be allocated to conflict prevention, peacebuilding and conflict stabilization programmes, where there are justifiable links to the national security purposes of that spending. As mentioned, work in this area could draw on mechanisms like the Integrated Security Fund.

Tell a clearer public story about how foreign aid supports UK interests and security. Ensure greater transparency and accountability in both aid and defence spending.

- The UK government should strengthen communication on how aid spending and multilateral cooperation contribute to global stability, including a focus on outcomes, alignment with national security objectives, and the balance between bilateral and multilateral spending. UK public opinion can be malleable on aid and development, but some recent polling indicates that the public is more supportive of aid when the linkages to national security and public health are clearly explained.[153] Currently, public communications about foreign aid are undermined by the lack of clarity and focus in UK development spending, including the problem that a very high share of the aid budget is spent on housing asylum-seekers.
- Public communications should emphasize the alignment of aid spending with national defence and security objectives. Messaging should avoid presenting aid and defence/security as competing priorities.
- The government should subject rising defence budgets to effective and independent scrutiny. This will require clearer accountability to parliament, and could also involve drawing on the model set by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact to monitor spending and ensure funds are spent effectively.

153 More in Common (2025), 'Public's priorities for aid post-cuts', https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/latest-insights/public-s-priorities-for-aid-post-cuts (accessed 17 Oct. 2025).

About the authors

Jerome Puri is a research fellow with the UK in the World Programme at Chatham House. Before joining Chatham House, Jerome worked with the International Committee of the Red Cross and was an intern with the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House. Currently, his research covers the UK's strategic relations with developing countries and economic security. He holds an MSc in international development and humanitarian emergencies from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a BA in philosophy, politics and economics from the University of Leeds.

Olivia O'Sullivan is the director of the UK in the World Programme at Chatham House. Before joining Chatham House, Olivia worked for over a decade in international development and foreign policy in the UK government, across roles in the former Department for International Development, the Cabinet Office and cross-government teams.

She was foreign policy lead and deputy head of the Open Innovation Team, a government research unit that translates academic evidence into policy. Her experience includes managing external expert engagement for the 2021 Integrated Review, working on the UK's funding and policy response to the Rohingya refugee crisis, and overseeing a range of international development and humanitarian funding programmes. She has an MPhil in international relations and an undergraduate degree in history from the University of Cambridge.

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Cover image: Sacks of food aid at a camp for internally displaced persons in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, December 2012.

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The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House
10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T +44 (0)20 7957 5700
contact@chathamhouse.org | chathamhouse.org

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