

What role does development play in solving today's challenges?

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In Britain, today's foreign policy makers speak of 'pragmatism' and the last Integrated Review placed three related ideas at the heart of foreign policy: sovereignty, security, and prosperity. These ideas are at odds with the concepts that underpinned the Department for International Development (DfID) and its successful approach to foreign issues. In fact, by prioritising concepts like sovereignty and security, and doing so without appropriate nuance, the hazy line between the domestic and the foreign becomes reified. Therefore, these contemporary ideas preclude successful engagement with global issues where previous ones emboldened it.

Concepts of interconnectivity and responsibility combined with the potential for positive human action in the face of ever-increasing globalisation once made it possible to believe that British action at the source of instability could solve issues of governance and security. Sunak's initial responses to policy issues facing Britain favour national security above all else, as a result small boat crossings have not fallen, partly because the government fails to approach the issue as anything other than an infringement of sovereignty; the proposed solutions work only with second-countries with little in origin-countries. This is not an argument for the return of DfID or of the political ideals of the late-90s; instead, I assert that in a policy environment which is characterised not by stasis but by movement narrow concepts of sovereignty and security do not fit nor do they aid in defining or solving policy issues.

Defining the nation

Moving the definition of the nation towards sovereignty and security legitimated Brexit but limited the policy possibilities for dealing with international issues. Doing this removed the rationale for development: if each country is primarily concerned with their own national security why should we help others? How can you work in-country if your primary concern is sovereignty? Development – and its wider concepts – doesn't have a place in such a world because it often fails to provide immediate results that benefit national security; it can be hard to see how stabilising Kosovo or Sierra Leone improves lives in Britain.

Instead, the theory of development is a series of propositions: Britain spends development funds and tightens international bonds; this improves stability and growth; the newfound stability and prosperity carries across borders and we all become safer as a result. This article is too short to deal with the balance of this argument but I will assert that it is an argument that can and should be made in opposition to a sovereignty and security-based international order. Its benefit is that it necessitates in-country engagement in areas of instability.

Framing policy issues like the small boats as needing to be solved in Britain's littoral waters is flawed because it fails to comprehend the immensity of it; and as a result, the concepts which underpin post-Brexit policy are flawed too. An answer lies in acknowledging the vulnerability of Britain's position in the world and not succumbing to the myth that is post-Brexit foreign policy; for solutions to succeed there must be a narrative made up of clear concepts that link Britain to global issues and acknowledge that what happens here does not begin when it is visible in [France](#) or [Turkey](#), but in pockets of instability around the world.



Answering to interconnectedness

Reinstating DfID may not be the answer but there are several lessons that we can take from it and previous foreign policy successes:

First, internationalised solutions are the way forward. Britain has struggled to succeed in individual foreign policy pursuits for a long time – with notable exceptions– and has done its best work either through the UN or in partnership with others. Climate strategies and improving safe routes for migration from third-countries are all things that require cooperation and which offer Britain a chance to lead; they also demand a long-term approach based on interconnectivity and shared jeopardy. With current policy not providing any notable improvement perhaps a possible solution lies in once again strengthening the overseas spending arm of the now-FDCO and emboldening it to pursue in-country solutions in a way that traditional foreign policy cannot? Any future government could do a lot worse than using the framework laid out by DfID in its early White Paper on globalisation.

Second, the concepts we use to understand policy are vital. Using concepts like sovereignty and security to comprehend engagement with the outside world are likely to lead to myopic options like 'pushing boats back' being treated seriously by policy makers. A better approach would be to acknowledge that, although it may be expensive, successful policy interventions do not solve the symptom but the disease itself. With change looking likely in 2024, any new government must be courageous to reject parochial post-Brexit policy norms and embrace a more sophisticated set of concepts that adequately explain our interconnected world.

Third, development brings little chance of electoral gain but does provide a proven pathway towards working amidst instability; however, the ideas that underpin successful engagement with global issues haven't changed - only opinions about them have. The history of Britain's foreign aid budget was historically one of political expediency, a way of getting governments to do what Britain wanted, which is echoed in today's policies. Despite this, when it has worked effectively, it has been about getting money and skills into the right places at the right time. Despite the DfID's history of inter-departmental difficulty, its work was immensely successful all across Africa and Asia, securing Britain crucial influence in improving conditions of instability – as well as working to return refugees to their homes and strengthen the institutions which govern their lives. As the repercussions of a failure to adapt to the post-Brexit world begin to show on the doorstep, Britain should look back at the methodology and concepts that have underpinned its history of successful work and interventions across the world.

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