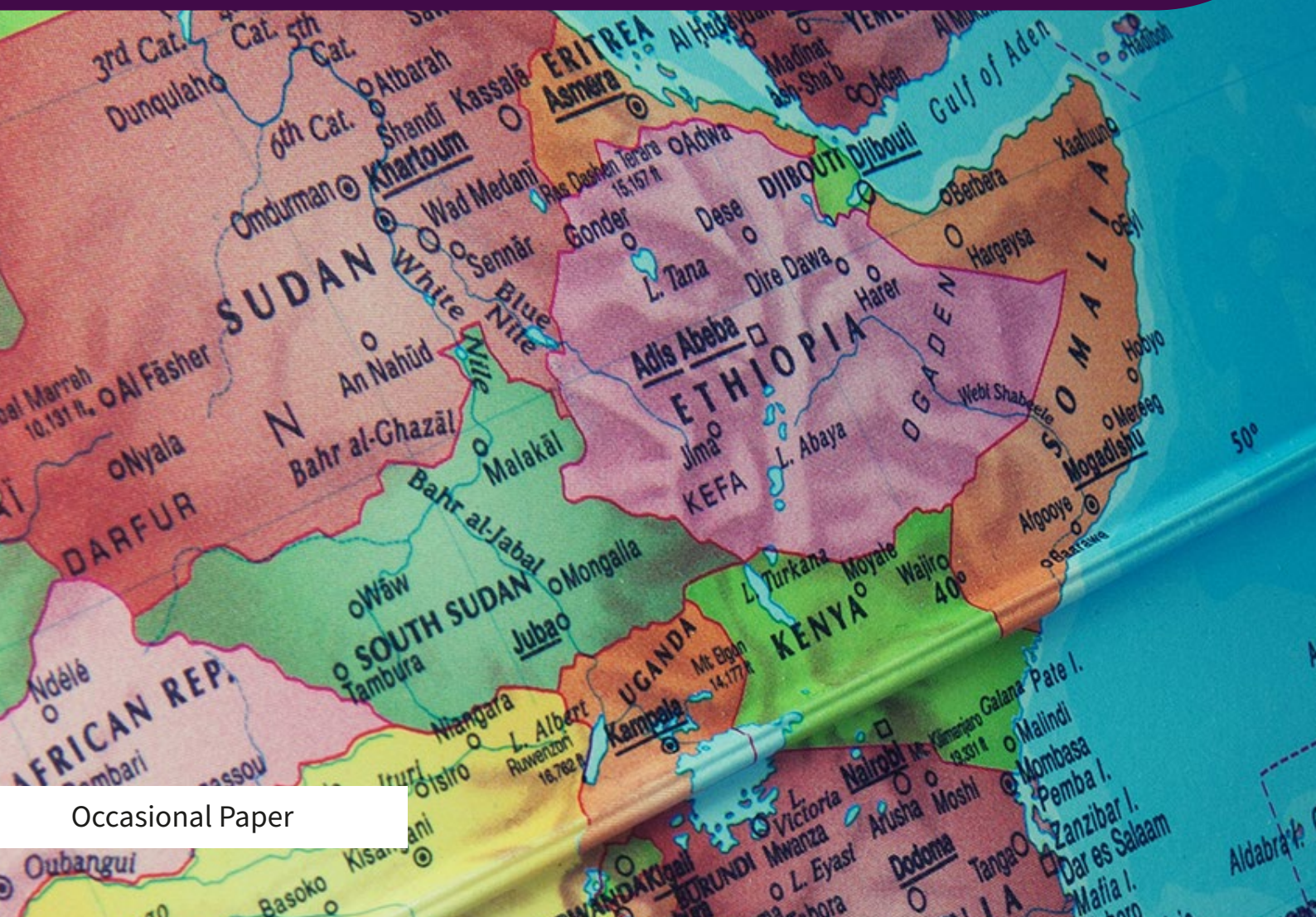


Occasional Paper

Furthering Global Britain? Reviewing the Foreign Policy Effect of UK Engagement in East Africa

Simon Rynn, Michael Jones and
Larry Attree



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Royal United Services Institute

for Defence and Security Studies

Whitehall

London SW1A 2ET

United Kingdom

+44 (0)20 7747 2600

www.rusi.org

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Executive Summary

Since 2016, successive British governments have sought to emphasise that a post-Brexit UK would be outward looking, collaborative and influential. A series of speeches and policy statements stressed that the UK would pursue future prosperity through overseas engagements built upon investments in diplomacy, trade, defence and development aid. In March 2021, the UK government published its Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, reiterating these themes and referencing Eastern Africa as a part of the world where the UK would increase its engagement, with explicit references to Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan.

A RUSI research project, 'Furthering Global Britain? Reviewing the Foreign Policy Effect of UK Engagement in East Africa', has examined whether, and how, the UK has leveraged international development, defence and diplomatic investments as envisaged. For the four above-mentioned countries, the project analysed the UK's core engagements from 2015 to 2022. Through key informant interviews and literature analysis, it identified factors that helped or hindered the UK in pursuing an integrated and collaborative foreign policy approach, and tested perceptions of the UK. The effects of major structural changes to UK foreign policy since 2015 were also studied, notably reducing the overseas aid budget, merging two ministries to create the new Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), and leaving the EU.

This paper provides background on recent UK policy towards the region, summarising the project's research findings, and offers recommendations for the UK government with relevance both to the region and to an integrated foreign policy globally. The key findings are as follows:

- In the face of volatility, the UK has had to adapt its approach towards the region numerous times since 2015. Actions include reallocating funding towards drought relief, suspending cooperation during conflict and political upheaval (Sudan), condemning reported war crimes (Ethiopia), bolstering stabilisation efforts in the wake of new military offensives (Somalia) and providing support to mitigate electoral instability (Kenya and Somalia).
- Despite inconsistent levels of political leadership, the UK contributed to relatively successful outcomes across the four case study countries. However, these are not sufficient (or necessarily sustainable) in isolation and continue to face important constraints and challenges.
- Attempts by UK officials to better integrate defence, international development and diplomatic work have made progress.

- While the abolition of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) is regretted by some UK regional partners, the unplanned creation of the FCDO shows early promise.
- The UK retains a good reputation in the region for the calibre of its diplomats and development and defence experts, and has broadly maintained staffing levels in the region, despite budget cuts.
- The UK is reasonably well regarded as a development, defence and diplomatic actor across the region. However, despite this, a range of middle and great powers increasingly offer alternative forms of support to East African governments, which contributes to perceptions of declining UK influence.
- The UK has established relationships and partnerships with a variety of actors. It often operates effectively through ad hoc groupings of bilateral and multilateral networks in the region and globally, bolstered by envoys and technical specialists.
- Between 2019 and 2021, the UK bilateral aid budget was reduced by around 50% across the region. External relationships suffered, as funding decisions were arrived at iteratively and were not always well communicated.
- Brexit did not significantly impair the UK's operational effectiveness in the region, but alongside other factors it probably contributed to a perception of declining influence.
- UK strategies at the country level were sometimes unclear, overly broad or outpaced by contextual changes. The lack of a regional strategy also remains a significant gap, given the transnational nature of the opportunities and challenges facing Eastern Africa.

The research raises important questions concerning the nature of UK–Africa relations and the role of aid, development and defence engagement within an integrated foreign policy. Various recommendations are offered in this paper, spanning operational and strategic levels. These include building on lessons from the DFID–Foreign & Commonwealth Office merger to ensure the FCDO's capabilities fully support integrated ways of working; better aligning mission priorities across the Gulf and Eastern Africa; and bolstering cooperation between special envoys and embassy-level staff. Explicit change management processes must be used to guide further organisational reform. More broadly, the UK should advocate for a clearer mandate when it comes to ad hoc groups such as the Quint and the Quad; centre long-term, sustainable engagement; and communicate the scope, scale and mechanics of continuing UK–EU cooperation to help defuse perceptions of an isolated, post-Brexit foreign policy, particularly to local audiences.

Perhaps most importantly in a world of increased geopolitical rivalry, the UK needs to clarify its positioning towards Africa. Policy statements in favour of ‘integration’ or ‘partnerships’, while useful, do not in themselves constitute effective strategy. With a contracting resource base, positive results may become harder to demonstrate in an increasingly competitive, transactional environment. African governments also now have a wider array of potential partners and greater leverage in shaping foreign engagement. As a result, the UK will need to market its added value towards Africa very clearly. As a first step, a two-way dialogue should be established with African partners at government and societal level to discuss shared priorities and ways of working.

Introduction

Since 2016, successive British governments have emphasised that a post-Brexit UK would be outward looking, collaborative and influential. They portrayed the UK as pursuing future prosperity through overseas engagements built upon investments in diplomacy, trade, defence and development aid. Following this trend, the UK government published an ambitious policy document, the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR21) in March 2021, expressing similar sentiments about the UK's role in the world while pointing to the challenge of increased geopolitical competition. Greater connectivity was promised between UK diplomacy, defence, trade and international development, alongside the UK working with like-minded governments towards shared goals of prosperity, democracy and security. East Africa, an area of longstanding UK interest, was among the regions prioritised for engagement, with explicit references to Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan.

A RUSI research project 'Furthering Global Britain? Reviewing the Foreign Policy Effect of UK Engagement in East Africa' has examined whether, and how, the UK has leveraged international development, defence and diplomatic investments as envisaged.¹ For the four above-mentioned countries, the project analysed the UK's core engagements from 2015 to 2022, identifying factors that helped or hindered its pursuit of an integrated and collaborative foreign policy approach, as well as testing perceptions of the UK. The effects of major structural changes to UK foreign policy since 2015 were also studied, notably reducing the overseas aid budget, merging two ministries to create the new Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), and leaving the EU.

This paper provides background on recent UK policy towards the region, summarising the project's research findings, and offers recommendations for the UK government with relevance both to East Africa and to an integrated foreign policy globally.

Methodology

The research methodology consisted of a review of selected policy literature and 182 semi-structured expert interviews carried out from mid-2021 to early 2023.

1. RUSI, 'Furthering Global Britain? Reviewing the Foreign Policy Effect of UK Engagement in East Africa', <<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/projects/furthering-global-britain-reviewing-foreign-policy-effect-uk-engagement-east-africa>>, accessed 21 May 2023.

Literature Review

A review was undertaken of official data and policy documents from government departments (principally the Ministry of Defence (MoD), the FCDO and the now-defunct Department for International Development (DFID)); parliamentary committees and regulatory bodies (for example, the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee); associated funding platforms (for example, the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), the Prosperity Fund, the Newton Fund and the Global Challenges Research Fund); and public entities such as the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI). Papers were analysed for key themes, sectoral engagement and expenditure that the UK continually or repeatedly adopted in its engagement in Eastern Africa. Data on UK aid, defence and diplomatic engagement in the four focal countries from 2015 to 2022 was used as a reference point to identify UK policy objectives and trends over time.

Interviews

Through semi-structured interviews, the team identified a number of key outcomes that the UK has sought to achieve in each of the focus countries, and which were informative in terms of the overarching research objectives. A range of actors who are familiar with UK engagement were then interviewed to understand the nature and significance of the UK contribution and the factors that had enabled or constrained engagement. A total of 182 interviews were carried out between September 2021 and January 2023, with a substantial number of them based in Eastern Africa.

Table 1: Interview Breakdown

Interview Type	Number
Academic	36
Non-governmental/civil society organisations	52
Media	5
Businesses/consultancies	17
Multilateral organisations	13
UK government	42
Other government representatives	17
Total	182

Source: Author generated.

This is the final paper in a series of publications stemming from this project, which includes a paper that lays out the project methodology and greater detail on UK investments across the region,² and four country case studies focusing on the UK's work in Ethiopia,³ Sudan,⁴ Somalia⁵ and Kenya.⁶

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2. Simon Rynn and Michael Jones with Elijah Glantz, 'Furthering Global Britain? An Overview of UK Development, Defence and Diplomatic Engagement in Eastern Africa', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (November 2022).
 3. Simon Rynn, 'On Shifting Ground: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Ethiopia', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (February 2023).
 4. Simon Rynn and Michael Jones, 'Deal or No Deal? An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Sudan', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (June 2023).
 5. Michael Jones, 'Mired in Mogadishu: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Somalia', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (June 2023).
 6. Michael Jones with Larry Attree, 'Bargaining with the Green City in the Sun: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Kenya', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (August 2023).

I. Background

Policy Context

The term ‘Global Britain’ was first used by Prime Minister Theresa May as shorthand for an outward-looking, collaborative and influential agenda. Dramatic events and policy changes were to follow. Under the subsequent leadership of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, a new government department, the FCDO, was announced in June 2020, merging the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) and DFID. Declared without prior planning, the process led to substantial and repeated rounds of restructuring.⁷

In November 2020, the UK official development assistance (ODA) budget was also cut, from 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) to 0.5%:⁸ a significant shift given that the UK had acquired a reputation overseas as a strong and generous aid donor since the 1990s. Some commentators lamented the end of the UK’s role as a global ‘development superpower’, claiming a loss of status⁹ and damage to partnerships and British influence. This stood in contrast to a well-publicised increase in the national defence budget. The government subsequently set out the conditions (fiscal tests) under which it intended to return the budget to 0.7% GNI.¹⁰

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7. See Anna Dickson and Philip Brien, ‘DFID and FCO Merger: Implications for International Development’, Insight, House of Commons Library, 18 June 2020, <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/dfid-and-fco-merger-implications-for-international-development/>>, accessed 25 January 2023. See also William Worley, ‘Who’s in the Running to be UK’s Top Developmental Official?’, *Devex*, 10 March 2023, <<https://www.devex.com/news/who-s-in-the-running-to-be-uk-s-top-development-official-105107>>, accessed 23 May 2023.
 8. In 2020, the UK economy contracted due to Covid-19 pandemic containment measures, contributing to a drop in aid expenditure. See FCDO, ‘Statistics on International Development: Provisional UK Aid Spend 2020’, April 2021, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/976923/Statistics-on-International-Development-Provisional-UK-Aid-Spend-2020a.pdf>, accessed 20 July 2023. In November 2020, the UK government announced it would only spend 0.5% of GNI on official development assistance (ODA) until the fiscal situation improved. See Independent Commission for Aid Impact, ‘ICAI Follow-Up Review of 2019–20 Reports’, 23 June 2021, <<https://icai.independent.gov.uk/review/icai-follow-up-review-of-2019-20-reports/>>, accessed 20 July 2023.
 9. See, for example, William Worley, ‘Advocates: UK Integrated Review Spells End of “Development Superpower Status”’, *Devex*, 16 March 2021, <<https://www.devex.com/news/advocates-uk-integrated-review-spells-end-of-development-superpower-status-99419>>, accessed 18 May 2023; Ranil Dissanayake, ‘Turning the UK from a Development Superpower to a Development Minnow in Six Easy Steps’, Center for Global Development, 27 September 2021, <<https://www.cgdev.org/blog/turning-uk-development-superpower-development-minnow-six-easy-steps>>, accessed 20 July 2023; Lizzie Roberts, ‘UK’s “Development Superpower” Status at Risk in DFID Merger, MPs Warn’, *The Telegraph*, 16 July 2020.
 10. HM Treasury, ‘Government Sets out Conditions for Returning to 0.7% Aid Target’, 12 July 2021, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-sets-out-conditions-for-returning-to-07-aid-target>>, accessed 22 May 2023.

In March 2021, the UK government published the IR21.¹¹ The document recognised a more competitive global context than in 2016 but reiterated now-familiar ‘Global Britain’ themes. It signalled a wish to play a proactive role in global affairs, to work in cooperation with others, particularly ‘like-minded bilateral and multilateral partners’, and to better integrate foreign policy, defence, trade and international development efforts.¹² Africa was referenced in terms of forging problem-solving partnerships and the pursuit of prosperity, democracy and security. The policy spoke of maintaining commitments to Africa with respect to ODA, but leaned strongly towards promoting trade, economic resilience and the alignment of international development with wider foreign policy. In this context, East Africa was pegged as a specific region for continued, and in some cases increased, engagement.¹³

On defence matters, it included a commitment to ‘persistent engagement’, for example, placing UK armed forces overseas for longer periods in a more proactive posture.¹⁴ A series of sub-strategies were subsequently released, including the 2021 Defence Command Paper and the 2022 International Development Strategy.¹⁵ Highly pertinent for Africa, the latter situated international development as part of a broader effort to build a network of like-minded partners with ‘all our capabilities – our diplomatic influence, trade policy, defence, intelligence, business partnerships and development expertise’.¹⁶ In doing so, it signalled an intention to use aid for both poverty reduction and wider development and foreign policy goals.

A ‘refreshed’ version of IR21 was released – IR23 – in March 2023. Africa was again identified as a region where the UK government should deepen relationships: ‘The UK’s approach in Africa will continue to be defined by a greater appreciation of the needs and perspectives of key partners across the continent, focusing on mutually beneficial development, security and defence partnerships, and support for clean infrastructure and climate adaptation’.¹⁷

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11. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London: The Stationery Office, 2021).
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
 13. The Integrated Review refers both to East Africa and to the Horn of Africa. The term Eastern Africa is also adopted here as a shorthand, as the project’s four focal countries span these sub-regions.
 14. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, pp. 22, 63, 69, 75, 78, 81. This was to include increased use of existing facilities in Kenya.
 15. William Worley, ‘The UK Government Lays out its New Development Objectives’, *Devex*, 13 March 2023, <<https://www.devex.com/news/the-uk-government-lays-out-its-new-development-objectives-105108>>, accessed 5 May 2023.
 16. FCDO, ‘The UK Government’s Strategy for International Development’, May 2022, pp. 5–6, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1075328/uk-governments-strategy-international-development.pdf>, accessed 15 June 2023.
 17. HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World*, CP 811 (London: The Stationery Office, 2023), p. 25.

IR23 also stated that the UK would ‘work to reinvigorate its position as a global leader on international development, pursuing patient, long-term partnerships tailored to the needs of the countries we work with, going beyond our Official Development Assistance (ODA) offer to draw on the full range of UK strengths and expertise’.¹⁸ Specific commitments included placing the Minister of State for Africa and International Development on the UK National Security Council (NSC), creating a new second permanent secretary role in the FCDO to oversee all UK development priorities, and establishing a new FCDO–Treasury governance structure to supervise all aid spending. The minister would subsequently clarify his own agenda for the future of UK international development.¹⁹

As a consequence, the UK policy context has evolved considerably over the research period. Transitions between prime ministers Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak, and foreign secretaries Dominic Raab, Liz Truss and James Cleverly, linked to the politics of Brexit and Covid-19, and sometimes accompanied by claims of incompetence or corruption, have also brought shifting priorities and tone.²⁰ Prolonged Brexit negotiations, the Covid-19 pandemic, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have also reshaped geopolitics and economics, with significant knock-on implications for UK spending plans as political attention and increasingly scarce resources were either diverted away from East Africa or towards more short-term crisis management. With already reduced levels of UK ODA diverted towards meeting refugee assistance costs domestically, aid spending in Eastern Africa is much lower than anticipated, despite the region facing severe drought and significant political, security and economic challenges.

UK Regional Policy Priorities and Engagements

UK engagement with Eastern Africa is multifaceted, with a long history. A non-exhaustive list of topics of concern include security and counterterrorism (Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and previously Ethiopia), migration (especially Sudan), humanitarian relief, stabilisation and conflict resolution (Sudan, Somalia), international development, climate and environment and trade (especially Kenya). This paper is informed by five preceding research papers. Taken together

18. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

19. FCDO, ‘Future of International Development: Minister Andrew Mitchell’s Speech’, 27 April 2023, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/minister-andrew-mitchell-speech-on-the-future-of-international-development>>, accessed 15 June 2023.

20. See, for example, David Demianyk, ‘Economist Blasts the “Raging Incompetence” of Truss and Kwarteng’, *HuffPost*, 27 September 2022; Jon Stone, ‘Corruption Experts Warn Boris Johnson’s Government is Worst Since WWII’, *The Independent*, 29 January 2022.

these provide details on country contexts, UK investments, objectives and selective outcomes across the region.²¹ A brief overview of the UK's key interests, policy priorities and engagements in each country from 2015 to 2022 is also provided.

Ethiopia

The UK government considers Ethiopia one of a handful of high-priority countries for UK engagement in Africa due to its size, influence and strategic location. Successive UK governments have sought a stable Ethiopia that is supportive of their foreign policy priorities both globally, especially the international development agenda, but also in the Horn of Africa, for example, with regard to the War on Terror and migration and in relation to the stability of Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan. Given that it is one of the largest refugee-hosting countries in Africa and the world,²² the UK sees Ethiopia as a key country for stemming onward migration.²³

Registering an annual growth rate of over 10% between 2004 and 2009, in the mid-2000s Ethiopia acted as a cheerleader for international development in global forums. Seeing Ethiopia as a quintessential 'developmental state', the UK became a staunch partner. Via the now-defunct DFID, the UK aligned strongly with the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's (EPRDF) development agenda. Ethiopia at times became the largest single recipient of UK bilateral aid globally, much of it channelled via the government in support of service delivery.²⁴ Expenditure averaged around £220 million per annum between 2016 and 2020.²⁵ This made the UK the second-largest donor after the US, contributing around 11% of Ethiopia's recorded aid income as reported via the OECD–Development Assistance Committee (DAC). Alongside investments in areas ranging from human rights to economic development and drought response, approximately 60% of the UK's bilateral aid budget has typically been channelled via central government programmes, the bulk allocated to multi-donor, multi-year funds that supported delivery of basic services.²⁶

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21. Four country case studies provide detailed analysis of these issues in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Sudan, alongside a summary paper of UK investments, priorities and engagement across the region.
 22. UNHCR, 'Country Refugee Response Plan 2023: Ethiopia', <<https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/100621>>, accessed 8 August 2023.
 23. Council of the European Union, 'Migration Flows in the Central Mediterranean Route', <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/central-mediterranean-route/>>, accessed 12 October 2022.
 24. DFID and UK Aid, 'Bilateral Aid Review: Technical Report', 3 March 2011, p. 33, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bilateral-aid-review-technical-report>>, accessed 22 January 2023.
 25. FCDO, *Annual Report and Accounts, 2021–22*, HC 493 (London: The Stationery Office, 2022).
 26. Data and descriptions drawn from respective programme annual reviews. See UK Government, 'Development Tracker: Ethiopia', <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/countries/ET>>, accessed 14 April 2023.

In IR21, the UK planned to work in partnership with Ethiopia ‘to further our shared prosperity goals, our democratic values and our security interests’ and to invest in ‘regional stability, moving towards closer defence cooperation’.²⁷ But cuts to the UK aid budget and the changing context in Ethiopia dictated otherwise. By 2021, UK bilateral spend had roughly halved compared to 2019. The remaining (£120-million) UK bilateral aid allocation to Ethiopia in 2021 was £134 million lower than the year before. This was the largest cut – in absolute, though not proportional terms – of any country budget worldwide.²⁸ Reductions were accompanied by reallocations to different sectors in light of a series of natural disasters, shifting ministerial priorities, Covid-19 and the Tigray War. In 2020, the UK spent £254 million in bilateral ODA in Ethiopia. Humanitarian aid (£103 million) accounted for approximately 40% of the budget as compared to 15% in 2013.²⁹

Despite some criticism, the UK has attempted to position itself as constructively critical of Ethiopian government actions during its war in Tigray, while continuing with reduced aid programming via government channels. Meanwhile, it has lobbied the federal government repeatedly for humanitarian access and respect for international humanitarian law, and provided humanitarian funding.³⁰

The UK government has maintained a relationship with the Ethiopian Ministry of National Defence for over two decades and has a permanent defence attaché in-country. Defence-related expenditure typically runs at under £1 million per annum, mostly drawn from regional budgets with competing priorities, including the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).³¹ Ethiopia’s support to AMISOM was the UK’s principal focus – many AMISOM troops have received training from the UK. Levels of UK ambition on security and defence issues have, however, declined over time. Ethiopia and the UK cooperated on counterterrorism issues, but the focus has mainly been on education and training in non-combat areas linked to the Ethiopian Peace Support Training Centre since 2018.

As well as supporting international development work, UK diplomatic interest has historically focused on issues above, ranging from trade promotion to

27. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 63.

28. FCDO, ‘Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2021’, November 2022, p. 27.

29. OECD, ‘Creditor Reporting System (CRS)’, <<https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1>>, accessed 13 April 2023. The OECD’s Creditor Reporting System (CRS) provides a ‘set of readily available basic data that enables analysis on where aid goes, what purpose it serves and what policies it aims to implement’ across individual projects and programmes. The CRS figures used in this paper reflect gross disbursements (rather than commitments) across all channels using constant (rather than current) prices to control for fluctuations in exchange rates and inflation levels.

30. FCDO, “‘The Conflict is Causing Untold Suffering and Must End’ – Minister for Africa’s Statement Following Visit to Ethiopia’, 20 January 2022, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-conflict-is-causing-untold-suffering-and-must-end-minister-for-africa-statement-following-visit-to-ethiopia>>, accessed 9 September 2022.

31. Rynn, ‘On Shifting Ground’, p. 10.

migration, counterterrorism cooperation and Ethiopian involvement in peacekeeping. Considerable energy has also been absorbed on consular cases involving dual nationals. Diplomatic relations were tested in early to mid-2021, as Western criticisms of the Ethiopian government blockade of Tigray and reported human rights abuses led to recriminations.³² The UK has pursued a lower-profile approach to the Tigray War compared with more prominent critics (for example, the EU, Ireland and the US), who briskly paused aid packages and publicly condemned Ethiopian government actions.³³ It has attempted to position itself as constructively critical while continuing to send aid via government. Amid a turbulent context that included war in Tigray and an intense government counterinsurgency campaign in Oromia, the UK has sought diplomatic engagement with the Ethiopian federal government at the highest level.³⁴ With respect to Tigray, it lobbied for improved humanitarian access, ceasefires and talks. It has not invested high levels of political capital, however, with infrequent senior ministerial visits.

Somalia

The UK was the second-largest DAC donor country to Somalia after the US between 2011 and 2020.³⁵ A significant proportion of this bilateral aid has been channelled towards government assistance and structural reform, public financial management and support for subnational administration.³⁶ This includes strengthening the building blocks of the Federal Government of Somalia's (FGS) legitimacy and accountability, from funding judicial development and service provision to supporting inclusive commercial growth.³⁷ Given the ongoing threat of Al-Shabaab and jihadist militancy, long-running investments were also allocated to security sector reform and law enforcement, with UK personnel leading the policing strand of Somalia's Comprehensive Approach to Security framework³⁸ and supporting projects on stabilisation and countering violent

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32. *Ibid.*, p. 12; Louisa Brooke-Holland, 'Ethiopia: Situation in Tigray', Research Briefing 09147, House of Commons Library, 18 June 2021.
33. See, for example, EU External Action, 'Tigray Conflict: Joint Statement by HR/VP Borrell and Commissioner Lenarčič on Massacres in Axum', 26 February 2021, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tigray-conflict-joint-statement-hrvp-borrell-and-commissioner-lenarctic-massacres-axum_en>, accessed 31 January 2023; Marie O'Halloran, 'Ethiopia to Close Dublin Embassy as Tigray Conflict Continues', *Irish Times*, 24 September 2021; Simon Marks, 'US to Freeze Funding for Ethiopia as Tigray Abuses Surface', *Bloomberg*, 28 May 2021.
34. Rynn, 'On Shifting Ground', p. 12.
35. Aside from 2017, when it briefly overtook US bilateral ODA spending. See OECD, 'Creditor Reporting System'.
36. Rynn and Jones with Glantz, 'Furthering Global Britain?'
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 37–47.
38. Report of the Secretary-General on Somalia, United Nations Security Council, 2 May 2018, pp. 8–11.

extremism/deradicalisation.³⁹ Efforts were likewise made to facilitate a political settlement at the federal level and to bolster humanitarian assistance.⁴⁰ Resources peaked in famine or near-famine years (2011/12 and 2017/18), with food security (as a sub-stream of ‘humanitarian preparedness and response’) emphasised as a thematic priority in IR21,⁴¹ supplementing resilience programmes to improve early-warning systems, coping mechanisms, local self-reliance and access to healthcare services.⁴²

In-country budgets saw a 56% contraction between 2020 and 2021. Although Somalia is still one of the top 10 recipients of British ODA, this put the UK below Germany’s bilateral aid spending level for the first time. The cuts came alongside a depreciating exchange rate and reallocations driven by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Although funding for famine relief remains comparatively high, only £61 million in humanitarian aid, healthcare and nutritional resourcing was provided in FY2022/23.⁴³ This reflected a sharp decrease from the £170-million package offered in 2017.

UK diplomacy has focused on ‘supporting and occasionally steering multilateral efforts to build up the FGS’s political anatomy, authority and capacity’.⁴⁴ Having co-hosted or facilitated several international conferences to formalise the federal structure and provisional constitution,⁴⁵ from 2017 UK attention increasingly shifted towards developing a basic security framework⁴⁶ and delivering the 2018–22 Somalia Transition Plan (STP). In tandem with the US, London backed the World Bank’s Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) debt relief process (2016), and – alongside other donors – helped the FGS satisfy the ‘Decision Point’ benchmarks by 2020.⁴⁷ As UN Security Council (UNSC) penholder, the UK also

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39. For example, see UK Aid, ‘Somalia Counter Extremism Programme’, Programme Summary, Development Tracker, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-3-CSSF-03-000026/documents>>, accessed 10 January 2023; UK Aid, ‘CSSF Somalia Stabilisation Programme’, Annual Review Summary Sheet, Development Tracker, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-3-CSSF-03-000028/documents>>, accessed 10 January 2023.
 40. Jones, ‘Mired in Mogadishu’, p. 14.
 41. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 46.
 42. Jones, ‘Mired in Mogadishu’.
 43. As of December 2022. See FCDO, ‘UK Announces Urgent Support to Somali People Facing Famine’, press release, 2 December 2022, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-announces-urgent-support-to-somali-people-facing-famine>>, accessed 9 January 2023.
 44. Jones, ‘Mired in Mogadishu’, p. 14.
 45. Including the 2012 London Conference, FCO, ‘London Conference on Somalia: Communique’, 23 February 2012, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/london-conference-on-somalia-communique--2>>, accessed 2 May 2023 and the 2013 Somali Compact, ‘A New Deal for Somalia, Brussels Conference: Communique’, 16 September 2013, <<https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/new-deal-for-somalia-conference/home.html>>, accessed 14 December 2022.
 46. Facilitated in part by the 2017 London Conference, HM Government, ‘London Somalia Conference 2017: Security Pact’, 11 May 2017, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/london-somalia-conference-2017-security-pact>>, accessed 14 December 2022.
 47. Jones, ‘Mired in Mogadishu’.

facilitated debate over the structuring, resourcing and timing of AMISOM (now the African Transition Mission – ATMIS), and contributed significant funding to the UN Office for Project Services and the AMISOM Trust Fund.⁴⁸

The need to develop a self-sufficient security apparatus capable of degrading Al-Shabaab was referenced in both the UK's 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review⁴⁹ and the 2021 Defence Command Paper. In recent years, the British Army has supplied infrastructural projects and training, stipends and equipment to the Somali National Army (SNA) under Operation *Tangham*, primarily for Sector 60 of the army, based around Baidoa.⁵⁰ UK-funded advisers remain embedded across federal institutions, including in the ministries of defence and internal security. The focus continues to be on reforming and capacitating national forces so that they can assume security responsibilities from ATMIS as the mission sets to conclude in late 2024.

Sudan

The UK has longstanding ties with the Republic of Sudan, previously a colonial condominium, and considers it one of a few high-priority countries on the continent. The view has been that worsening political and economic situations in Sudan would impact the Horn of Africa and North Africa and negatively affect the UK's vital interests. The IR21 specifically mentioned the UK's commitment to 'continue to support conflict resolution and stabilisation efforts in ... Sudan'.⁵¹ Outward migration has also been a concern. The UK is home to a significant and longstanding Sudanese diaspora (around 20,000 people). The UK Home Office has led efforts to curtail migration from Sudan through strengthened border management and enforcement.⁵²

UK bilateral aid commitments to Sudan averaged around £93 million per annum between 2016 and 2020.⁵³ Recent ODA-funded programmes have contributed on issues from humanitarian relief and humanitarian system reform⁵⁴ to economic

48. *Ibid.*

49. HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, CM 9161 (London: The Stationery Office, 2015).

50. Jones, 'Mired in Mogadishu'; Michael Jones, 'Taking Stock in Somalia', *RUSI Commentary*, 8 March 2022.

51. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 63.

52. See, for example, Aegis Trust, 'Home Office Wins Darfur Asylum Test Case', *Sudan Tribune*, 14 November 2007, <<https://sudantribune.com/article24859/>>, accessed 19 October 2022; Larry Lock, 'Upper Tribunal: No Reason to Change Sudan Country Guidance', *Free Movement*, 20 September 2019, <<https://freemovement.org.uk/upper-tribunal-no-reason-to-change-sudan-country-guidance/>> accessed 19 October 2022; Home Office, 'Report of a Fact-Finding Mission to Khartoum, Sudan', November 2018.

53. FCDO, *Annual Report and Accounts, 2021–22*, p. 264.

54. FCDO, 'Sudan Humanitarian Preparedness and Response', *Development Tracker*, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-301450/summary>>, accessed 12 October 2022.

reform,⁵⁵ reducing female genital mutilation and child marriage,⁵⁶ to water and sanitation,⁵⁷ civil society, and supporting the Juba Peace Agreement (2020).⁵⁸ The highest-expenditure items have been humanitarian relief and economic reform, and social safety net support.⁵⁹ As UK aid contributions to neighbouring countries declined, the Sudan aid budget temporarily rose from £93 million in 2019 to £139 million in 2020. This was due to a one-off increase for a new ‘Sudan Family Support Programme’,⁶⁰ the UK contribution to a World Bank-run programme designed to cushion the needy from economic reforms.⁶¹ Alongside this, the UK campaigned hard at the World Bank and the IMF for Sudanese debt relief. Aid contributions were halted following the October 2021 coup. The UK, together with the US, World Bank and other major donors, suspended non-humanitarian aid.⁶² UK bilateral ODA funding dropped back to £93 million by the end of 2021. This still left Sudan as the fifth-largest recipient of UK bilateral ODA worldwide.⁶³

Given Sudan’s long period of military rule and the existence of UK, UN and EU sanctions regimes, opportunities for defence engagement have been few. UK–Sudan defence engagement was completely suspended following the October 2021 coup, and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) withdrew its defence attaché from Khartoum in 2022.

The UK’s Sudan diplomacy has focused over time on issues ranging from peace negotiations to migration, counterterrorism and humanitarian access, to the imposition of sanctions and the work of the International Criminal Court (ICC). As a follow-on to involvement in the negotiations for the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the UK acted as ‘penholder’ for the UN hybrid mission in Darfur (UNAMID) and its successor, the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS). In March 2016, a UK–Sudan Strategic Dialogue was set up – a formalised contact forum in which senior officials from the two

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55. FCDO, ‘Sudan Economic Impact and Reform (SEIR) Programme’, Development Tracker, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-301161/summary>>, accessed 5 October 2022.
 56. FCDO, ‘Sudan Free of Female Genital Mutilation Phase 2’, Development Tracker, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300218/documents>>, accessed 18 October 2022.
 57. FCDO, ‘Urban Water for Sudan (UW4S)’, Development Tracker, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-204045/summary>>, accessed 12 October 2022.
 58. FCDO, ‘Sudan Peace and Reconciliation Programme (SPRP)’, Development Tracker, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-301306/summary>>, accessed 12 October 2022.
 59. Rynn and Jones, ‘Deal or No Deal’.
 60. World Bank, ‘Sudan Family Support Project’, <<https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P173521>>, accessed 12 October 2022.
 61. Figures drawn from OECD–DAC CRS data on UK bilateral ODA spending in Sudan. See OECD, ‘Creditor Reporting System’.
 62. *Middle East Monitor*, ‘US Suspends \$700m in Aid for Sudan’, 25 October 2021, <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211025-breaking-us-suspends-700-million-in-aid-for-sudan/>>, accessed 12 October 2022.
 63. FCDO, ‘Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2021’, p. 6.

countries met under the shadow of UK and multilateral sanctions.⁶⁴ Economic sanctions under UN and EU auspices⁶⁵ were central to UK policy in the hope of incentivising reduced conflict, given previous allegations of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in the early 2000s.⁶⁶ The UK was also involved in establishing the Khartoum Process, a controversial intergovernmental dialogue platform to facilitate cooperation on migration.⁶⁷ Particularly since the ousting of President Omar Al-Bashir, UK ambassadors have been prominent voices in support of democratic transition,⁶⁸ often working with the US and Norway ‘Troika’. UK diplomacy also played an important role in the June–July 2019 ‘Quartet’ negotiations that produced a civilian-led, transitional government.

Attempts to facilitate an agreement between key political and security factions after the 2021 military coup culminated in the December 2022 ‘Framework Agreement’, a deal brokered by UNITAMS, the Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union (AU) and backed by, among others, the UK. Despite these efforts, fighting again broke out in Khartoum on 15 April 2023. Violence subsequently spread, leading to reports of war crimes and mass displacement, especially in Darfur.⁶⁹ While the UK and other foreign governments initially focused on evacuating nationals and calling for ceasefires and restraint,⁷⁰ competing diplomatic tracks have gradually coalesced over time. The US and Saudi Arabia, for instance, convened talks in Jeddah but were criticised for failing to coordinate with other Quad members (including the UK) or regional organisations such as the AU.⁷¹ Although a temporary truce was brokered in late May, the deal – like many others before and since – collapsed under repeated violations. Separately, an IGAD summit was hosted in July, rivalling AU leadership claims over any mediation process, and bilateral and multilateral arrangements fronted by Chad and Egypt started pushing their own

64. FCDO, ‘UK-Sudan Strategic Dialogue in Khartoum, 19 to 20 October 2021: Communiqué’, Policy Paper, 20 October 2021.

65. The UK adopted the EU’s sanctions regime into British law following Brexit.

66. See FCDO, ‘UK Sanctions Relating to Sudan’, 21 July 2020, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/uk-sanctions-on-sudan>>, accessed 12 October 2022. See also DFID, ‘DFID Sudan’.

67. EU/Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative, ‘The Khartoum Process’, <<https://www.khartoumprocess.net/>>, accessed 12 September 2022.

68. *Dabanga*, ‘British Ambassador to Sudan: “Revolution is the Choice of the People”’, 2 May 2019, <<https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/british-ambassador-to-sudan-revolution-is-the-choice-of-the-people>>, accessed 11 August 2022.

69. *Al Jazeera*, ‘Ethnic Violence in Sudan Raises Genocide Alarm as War Rages on’, 13 June 2023, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/13/ethnic-violence-in-sudan-raises-genocide-alarm-as-war-rages-on>>, accessed 9 August 2023; Michael Jones, ‘Eating Their Young: The Fratricidal Throes of a Sudanese Kleptocracy’, *RUSI Commentary*, 7 July 2023.

70. Antoinette Radford and Emily McGarvey, ‘Sudan Violence: UK Diplomats Evacuated from Khartoum’, *BBC News*, 24 April 2023.

71. Crisis Group, ‘A Race Against Time to Halt Sudan’s Collapse’, Africa Briefing No. 190, 22 June 2023.

initiatives.⁷² The result has been ‘disarray’ and confusion, ‘posing the risk that opportunities [for peace-making] will slip away unexplored’.⁷³

Kenya

Kenya has been an enduring priority for UK engagement in Africa since the country’s independence in 1963, reflecting a relationship grounded on shared history, language, economic ties, diasporic networks and security needs.⁷⁴ Name-checked in IR21 and the International Development Strategy, these linkages were formalised by the 2020–25 Strategic Partnership, with bilateral interests spanning mutual prosperity; regional stability; sustainable development and reduction of extreme poverty; collaborative leadership on climate and environmental issues; peer learning, knowledge sharing and research; and the expansion of individual and institutional networks.⁷⁵

Eclipsed by the US in the mid-1970s,⁷⁶ the UK’s bilateral ODA contributions to Kenya averaged around £117 million between 2016 and 2020, peaking at £152.8 million in 2017⁷⁷ before falling below those of Japan in 2018, and France and EU institutions in 2020, and Germany a year later.⁷⁸ Partially tied to the drop from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI, the government’s in-country budget reduced from £134 million (2019) to £72 million (2021) – roughly 46% over two years – slightly exceeding the 42% cut across Africa as a whole.⁷⁹

In terms of coverage and content, social infrastructure has regularly consumed the largest proportion of UK ODA funding, although the specific distribution has varied over time.⁸⁰ Support for social protection and education, for instance, diminished in 2013/14, while investment in health systems grew steadily from 2017 and extended further as part of the COVAX vaccine rollout.⁸¹ Attention has likewise been paid to multi-sector work – particularly environmental protections,

72. Crisis Group, ‘Time to Try Again to End Sudan’s War’, Statement, 21 July 2023.

73. *Ibid.*

74. Jones with Attree, ‘Bargaining with the Green City in the Sun’.

75. FCDO, ‘UK–Kenya Strategic Partnership 2020 to 2025: Joint Statement’, press release, 21 January 2020, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-kenya-strategic-partnership-2020-2025>>, accessed 6 May 2023.

76. Michael Chege, ‘Political Economy of Foreign Aid to Kenya’, in Nic Cheeseman, Karuti Kanyinga and Gabrielle Lynch (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 552.

77. FCDO, *Annual Report and Accounts, 2021–22*.

78. Jones with Attree, ‘Bargaining with the Green City in the Sun’.

79. FCDO, ‘Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2021’, November 2022, p. 74, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1119765/Statistics-on-International-Development-Final-UK-Aid-Spend-2021.pdf>, accessed 7 February 2023.

80. Rynn and Jones with Glantz, ‘Furthering Global Britain?’.

81. See UNICEF, ‘Another 410,000 COVID-19 Vaccine Doses Arrive in Kenya, Donated by the UK’, press release, 31 July 2021.

policies and administrative management⁸² – and humanitarian aid, including emergency (drought and flood) relief, and refugee support and empowerment.⁸³ After the outbreak of electoral (and state) violence in 2007/8, the UK increased its focus on governance, peace and security issues. Additional resourcing was also channelled towards improving the accountability of public institutions, anti-corruption efforts, conflict mitigation and reducing the risk of radicalisation.⁸⁴

History has proven both a ‘benefit and burden’ for diplomatic engagement.⁸⁵ The UK retains close ties to Kenya’s political, military and economic elite, but has often been scapegoated when politically expedient. Following then-candidate Uhuru Kenyatta’s indictment by the ICC in 2013, for example, elements of Kenyatta’s Jubilee party were able to dismiss Western criticism as ‘neo-colonial’, refusing any renewal of UK defence cooperation and accelerating his predecessor’s ‘look east’ strategy.⁸⁶ While relations gradually improved, culminating in a prime ministerial visit by Theresa May in 2018, similar issues emerged over successive electoral cycles (2017 and 2022), revealing the difficult dynamics that UK officials continue to navigate.⁸⁷

Contemporary relations with Nairobi are also wrapped up in UK commercial interests. Kenya is the largest African recipient of British ‘aid-for-trade’ programming,⁸⁸ and significant efforts are being made to boost environmental, social and corporate standards. In 2020, an Economic Partnership Agreement pledged funds to boost trade and granted Kenyans ‘duty and quota free’ access to UK markets, although there were concerns such bilateral arrangements could disrupt regional integration within the East Africa Community,⁸⁹ or saturate local markets with cheap imports.⁹⁰ In 2021, Kenya was considered a priority

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82. Predating and overlapping with the UK’s COP presidency, London has supported a Kenyan roadmap on climate change with a strong emphasis on growing clean energy generation and (battery) storage capacity and helped promote reforestation and resilience in arid areas and other ecological projects, as well as developing regulatory systems for green finance.
 83. Rynn and Jones with Glantz, ‘Furthering Global Britain?’.
 84. DFID, ‘DFID Kenya’, Country Profile, 2018, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/913359/Kenya-Profile.pdf>, accessed 23 February 2023.
 85. Jones with Attree, ‘Bargaining with the Green City in the Sun’, p. 1.
 86. Njoki Wamai, ‘International Relations and the International Criminal Court’, in Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch, *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*, pp. 565, 571.
 87. Jones with Attree, ‘Bargaining with the Green City in the Sun’.
 88. ICAI, ‘Approach Paper: UK Aid for Trade’, 26 October 2022, <<https://icai.independent.gov.uk/html-version/uk-aid-for-trade/>>, accessed 20 February 2023.
 89. House of Lords International Agreements Committee, ‘Scrutiny of International Agreements: Economic Partnership Agreement with Kenya, Trade in Goods Agreement with Norway and Iceland, and Free Trade Agreement with Vietnam’, HL Paper 221, Second Report of Session 2019–21, February 2021, p. 5. East Africa Community membership includes Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.
 90. Kwadwo Sarkodie and Thomas Ajose, ‘The Kenya–UK Trade Agreement: Trading Up?’, *African Law and Business*, 14 May 2021, <<https://www.africanlawbusiness.com/news/16287-the-kenya-uk-trade-agreement-trading-up>>, accessed 24 August 2022.

country in British International Investment (BII)'s \$1-billion pan-African suite of infrastructure, finance and climate projects, supplementing assistance to 30 regional funds and more than 80 local finance, tech and green enterprises.⁹¹ Later that year, then foreign secretary Dominic Raab declared a further £132 million in public and private funding aligned with Kenyatta's 'Big Four Agenda'.⁹²

The UK has long considered Kenya an 'essential' defence partner, as the country hosts significant British military assets and infrastructure, adjoins Somalia, South Sudan and Ethiopia, and offers a logistical corridor to central Africa.⁹³ Much of this relationship is framed by the Security Compact, an arrangement approved in 2015 (and episodically updated) covering countering violent extremism, border and aviation policing, and criminal justice cooperation, alongside efforts to tackle instability and conflict. Defence Cooperation Agreements were also signed in 2016 and 2021, renewing the legal instruments that maintain BATUK (the British Army Training Unit Kenya, host of the multinational *Askari Storm* exercises)⁹⁴ and allow capacity building with the Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF).⁹⁵ In addition, BPST-A (the British Peace Support Team) advises and assists African militaries, supporting peacekeeping operations such as AMISOM and ATMIS, and working with partners including the International Peace Support Training Centre to strengthen institutional learning and regional responses to complex emergencies.⁹⁶ In recent years, Kenya was designated a 'regional hub' in the MoD's 'persistent engagement strategy', with the 2021 Defence Command Paper prescribing a further expansion of UK commitments and the continuation of joint training and readiness.⁹⁷

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91. BII, as the UK's development finance institution and impact investor, has held various monikers over the years, starting out as the Colonial Development Corporation (1948) before being relabelled as the Commonwealth Development Corporation (1963) and latterly BII (2021). By 'investing patient, flexible capital to support private sector growth and innovation', BII aims to create 'more productive, sustainable and inclusive economies across Africa, Asia and the Caribbean'. See BII, 'Our Company', <<https://www.bii.co.uk/en/about/our-company/>>, accessed 21 July 2023; Miriam Wangui, 'UK's CDC Group to Invest KSh110 Billion in African Businesses', *Kenyan Wall Street*, 21 January 2021, <<https://kenyanwallstreet.ckillkoom/uks-cdc-group-to-invest-ksh110-billion-in-african-businesses/>>, accessed 16 May 2023.
 92. These included food security, affordable housing, universal healthcare, manufacturing and job creation.
 93. Jones with Attree, 'Bargaining with the Green City in the Sun'.
 94. Forces.Net, 'Exercise Askari Storm: Preparing Battalions For Deployment', 31 March 2019, <<https://www.forces.net/news/exercise-askari-storm-preparing-battalions-deployment>>, accessed 2 May 2023.
 95. Rynn and Jones with Glantz, 'Furthering Global Britain?'.
 96. Jones with Attree, 'Bargaining with the Green City in the Sun', p. 19.
 97. Ministry of Defence, *Defence in a Competitive Age*, CP 411 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021), p. 31.

II. Research Findings

This project's most prominent findings from all source data across the four case studies – including secondary source and interview data – are provided below. Where relevant, recommendations are offered for UK policymakers.

Finding 1

In the face of volatility, the UK has had to adapt its approach towards the region numerous times since 2015. Actions include reallocating funding towards drought relief, suspending cooperation during conflict and political upheaval (Sudan), condemning reported war crimes (Ethiopia), bolstering stabilisation efforts (Somalia), and providing support to mitigate electoral instability (Kenya and Somalia).

- Kenya offers relative stability, commercial opportunities and a good degree of judicial independence. But the economy has struggled to recover from Covid-19-era restrictions and global price increases. Political and ethnic divisions persist, and state systems are not meeting public expectations amid corruption, inequality and the high cost of living. Against this backdrop, the UK has dedicated significant time, diplomatic capital and financial resources to electoral support and institution building to help consolidate reforms prescribed in Kenya's 2010 Constitution.⁹⁸ With contested polls (and an eventual re-run) in 2017, the British High Commission (BHC) doubled down on its supply of technical assistance across various regulatory bodies such as the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission, despite increasing contextual difficulties.⁹⁹ Crucially, early engagement in the electoral cycle bought time for participatory planning and networking, enabling British stakeholders to better navigate the stringent restrictions imposed on donors by Kenya's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the same time, the BHC assumed an influential role in coordinating external engagement, partially facilitated by its unusual levels of access to local institutions; the longevity and depth

98. Many of these changes were adopted to dilute the 'winner-takes-all' dynamic previously conditioning Kenya's so-called 'imperial presidency', from creating a 50% plus one threshold for electoral victory and devolving executive power to 47 new counties, to establishing a Supreme Court and an Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission.

99. As in 2017, the Commission received just a fraction of the cash requested to run the ballot, with incremental top-ups in February and March 2022 still leaving a significant deficit. Measures recommended by past audits and the Independent Review Commission were similarly delayed or ignored, and 'several pieces of electoral legislation' were debated within the Kenyan parliament until mid-2022, 'leaving [IEBC] guessing about regulations it [had] to enact ahead of the vote'. See International Crisis Group, 'Kenya's 2022 Election: High Stakes', Africa Briefing No. 182, 9 June 2022.

of bilateral UK ties to Kenya; the coincidental absence of a US ambassador; and the High Commissioner's personal clout.¹⁰⁰ Much of this leadership was 'behind the scenes', with the UK contributing towards the donor agenda while reportedly sharing or ceding ownership to mitigate the political sensitivities previously disrupting British interventions in 2013 and 2017.¹⁰¹

- Visible changes to Ethiopia's existing political settlement began in 2018 with the dissolution of the ruling EPRDF. The UK enjoyed a close working relationship with the Ethiopian government until 2019, cooperating and financing significant poverty reduction efforts and pursuing shared counterterrorism objectives, despite worsening political divisions and insecurity. This began to change following the November 2020 Tigray War and subsequent security and economic crisis. The UK attempted to maintain access to newly installed prime minister Abiy Ahmed's government at the highest level while being critical of the conduct of the war. It continued to provide financial aid and technical assistance to government departments for socioeconomic development but at lower levels than before, while lobbying for humanitarian access to Tigray. Defence cooperation outside peacekeeping training was stopped. Yet by attempting to keep all options and channels open, the UK attracted criticism from both the Ethiopian federal government and pro-Tigrayan voices.
- Somalia remains poor and insecure, with much of the country inaccessible to governmental and international actors. In working to support a 'good enough' state capable of out-competing Al-Shabaab, the UK developed new (experimental) approaches to stabilisation in support of Operation *Badbaado*, an SNA-led offensive focused on the liberation of several 'bridge-towns' across Lower Shabelle between 2019 and 2020. By shifting towards a more politically sensitive methodology based on grassroots reconciliation, dialogue and community buy-in – fronted in large part by the Early Recovery Initiative – the UK was able to build momentum for peace committees and recovery operations. Although primarily confined to the tactical level given a lack of follow-up funding and police coverage, these inputs were nevertheless considered 'significant and influential' on their own terms, while plugging a gap in international programming.¹⁰² British engagement also proved flexible in reallocating resources to help avert the risk of famine in 2017, marking a substantial (if imperfect) improvement on similar interventions in 2011/12. Subsequent efforts in 2022 were, however, criticised as insufficient and under-financed, leveraging technical expertise and convening power in an enabler role, rather than exercising the leadership and multiplier effects evident five years previously.

100. Jones with Attree, 'Bargaining with the Green City in the Sun'.

101. *Ibid.*

102. Jones, 'Mired in Mogadishu'.

- In Sudan, the UK acquired a reputation over many years for careful diplomacy, even-handed dealings around the north–south conflict, and ongoing support for humanitarian relief. Under President Omar Al-Bashir, relations were highly challenging. The situation pivoted to a close working relationship with the brief hybrid transitional government of 2019–21. While ending cooperation on security and development matters, the UK maintained contact with key political and military figures even after the October 2021 coup. This caused some pro-democracy actors to criticise the UK’s support for ‘hybrid’ or compromise agreements that featured the security services. While events have moved on with the outbreak of violence in April 2023, there is still a reservoir of goodwill towards the UK in Sudan and an appetite for increased engagement.

This rapidly changing context points to the importance of up-to-date multi-disciplinary analysis to inform decisions on strategy, action and difficult trade-offs. It also underscores that peace, adequate governance and security are fundamental for progress on other agendas.

Recommendation: Make use of the combined skills and levers that exist across government – from trade-related to cultural, diplomatic and security – to develop and periodically update internal analysis of the political, security and economic situation in the region, and identify any levers for change that will permit effective UK action at country level.

Recommendation: Ensure that future UK international development strategies and white papers recognise the importance of addressing security, conflict and governance challenges to enable progress on development and prosperity objectives in East Africa and other fragile environments.

Finding 2

Despite inconsistent levels of political leadership, the UK contributed to relatively successful outcomes across the four case study countries. However, these are not sufficient (or necessarily sustainable) in isolation and continue to face important constraints and challenges.

Based on interviewees’ assessments of UK inputs and successes, several example focus areas emerged:

- In Kenya, the UK displayed flexibility, contextual awareness and diplomatic influence in delivering well-timed, long-running electoral support (and subsequent crisis management). Together with other international partners and endogenous factors, these efforts helped strengthen trust and public safety during the largely peaceful 2022 election. Similarly, defence engagement

fed into tactical, doctrinal and possibly operational improvements in the KDF, and ensured a persistent, close working relationship with Nairobi. UK programming was likewise able to draw on its networking and technical expertise to contribute to a boost in Kenyan literacy rates, academic performance and girls' progression to secondary-level education. However, such experiences also reflect the inherent difficulty of engendering sustainable change across institutional cultures, especially when navigating political sensitivities and elite interests, leaving the longer-term and higher-level impact of UK interventions (often) unclear.

- Incremental progress was made in Ethiopia, with the UK feeding into (and funding) plans to liberalise the agriculture, manufacturing, mining, tourism, and information and communications sectors, backed by international financial institution (IFI) loans. Partly as a result of embassy efforts and relationships, a consortium including UK firm Vodafone won a licence to operate in Ethiopia in a deal that aimed to catalyse investment and jobs in 2021, although wider liberalisation plans have since faltered. More fruitfully, the UK supported a peace initiative in Ethiopia's Somali Region, with marginalised and aggrieved populations able to participate. Despite problems with implementation, the Asmara agreement of 2018 may have contributed for a time to reduced violence and improved stability, and facilitated the movement of goods into northern Kenya and Somaliland. This demonstrates how long-term, low-key investments, when combined with political savvy and a trusted implementing partner, can generate results.
- In Somalia, the UK remained an important international stakeholder, leveraging its financial sway in the World Bank's Multi-Partner Fund, diplomatic capital as UNSC Penholder, and existing relationships with federal member states (FMS) authorities to help push through support for revenue generation, financial management and debt relief via the HIPC process. While donors may have downplayed or deferred corruption and accountability issues along the way, the effort to create administrative structures commensurate with the ambition of Somalia's transition plans may be an important foundation.¹⁰³ Programmes like the Early Recovery Initiative also appeared promising, providing innovative, dialogue-based stabilisation models to better address community needs and bolster FGS-FMS relations.¹⁰⁴ Although experiencing a significant drop in resourcing compared to 2017, UK technical expertise and convening power likewise fed into ongoing efforts to supply famine relief – albeit not on the scale required. Nevertheless, the pernicious impact of economic extraversion and foreign dependency, and a lack of political

103. Joakim Gundel, 'Debt Relief and the Political Marketplace in Somalia', Conflict Research Programme memo, London School of Economics, 2 November 2020; Jones, 'Mired in Mogadishu'.

104. See FCDO, 'Somalia: Stabilisation Programme'.

unanimity among Somalis themselves, continue to hamper higher-level UK objectives, namely the development a durable federal state.

- Despite a chequered past, the UK has displayed significant leverage at key moments in Sudan, building on a long history of engagement. Supporting good practice around conflict sensitivity, localisation, transparency and resilience-building allowed British aid to assist more than two million people with food, cash, education, healthcare and water access between 2017 and 2022. Even by linking emergency relief and high-level diplomacy, the UK – alongside other donors – nevertheless failed to win sustainable openings in the humanitarian space before the military reclaimed power. Similarly, British officials proved crucial in backing IFI efforts to cut subsidies, increase public sector wages and establish social safety nets during the political transition, enabling Sudan to eventually satisfy IMF requirements and unlock concessional finance worth \$2.5 billion for the first time in 30 years. Nonetheless, limited relief payments, declining living standards, rampant inflation and food shortages all heightened political and social divisions in the lead up to the October 2021 coup, suggesting the strategy framing UK and Western approaches may have ultimately been counterproductive.

Despite facing difficult contextual conditions, resource limitations, uncertainties over critical assumptions and persistent ministerial upheaval in London, these interventions capture important elements of the contemporary UK ‘offer’. While claims of progress should not be overstated, the examples above provide useful insights into how the UK might continue to advance key elements of its agenda.

Recommendation: Given the relatively small sample of outcomes, interventions and focus areas covered by this project, further research should be conducted into how the UK can pursue (and sustain) its goals, informed by an analysis of UK comparative advantages and limitations across the diplomatic, defence and developmental fields.

Finding 3

Attempts by UK officials to better integrate defence, international development and diplomatic (3Ds) work have made progress.

- UK policy has long emphasised the importance of joined-up action across the ‘3Ds’ and to varying degrees – as per IR21 – have tried to incorporate questions of trade, economic resilience and even science and technology. The research showed clear examples of integrated thinking and action, tying together development, diplomacy and defence.
- UK diplomatic, defence and developmental inputs appear, for the most part, mutually reinforcing in Kenya, with high-level engagement from Whitehall

combining well with the influence, capabilities and sensitivity of country-based teams. For example, girls' education has been a UK priority for many years, and coordination across the different sections of BHC was said to have accelerated progress on project delivery. Diplomatic outreach likewise complemented long-term electoral reforms, helping mitigate the risk of local spoilers by ensuring capacity-building efforts were palatable to Kenyan elites. There were also various cases of trade and UK private sector investment becoming better linked with development work, and progress synthesising defence coverage with other strands of UK engagement via frameworks such as CSSF (and specific units like BPST-A). Nevertheless, some respondents felt that the drive for integration may have contributed to deprioritisation of human development agendas in favour of commercial and security concerns.

- In Somalia, integration across different government workstreams has long been pursued. Good examples include active diplomatic support for debt relief alongside technical work by development staff. This apparently helped with anti-corruption efforts in the security sector, though there was said to be room for improvement in linking up legacy DFID development work, military inputs and Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF)-funded projects.¹⁰⁵
- Sudan has provided fewer opportunities to pursue defence engagement or promote trade, but use of development aid and diplomacy has become more integrated over time.
- In the telecoms sector, Ethiopia provided an example of joined-up working across diplomacy, trade promotion and economic development. But outside peacekeeping work, there have been few opportunities for defence engagement in recent years.

Recommendation: To support more coherent, joined-up UK policy towards Africa using the International Development/Africa ministerial NSC seat that was announced in IR23 to put key topics (for example, development, migration, debt) regularly and proactively in front of senior and mid-level decision-makers from across government.

Recommendation: Improve cross-governmental understanding of integrated working across defence, diplomacy and development issues. Measures could include objective-setting, training (for example, the FCDO diplomatic academy), work shadowing or issuing good practice guides.

105. HM Government, 'Conflict, Stability and Security Fund: Annual Report 2021/22', 2023, < https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1158328/Conflict__Stability_and_Security_Fund_annual_report_2021_to_2022.pdf>, accessed 15 July 2023.

Finding 4

While the abolition of DFID is regretted by some UK regional partners, the creation of the FCDO, though unplanned, shows early promise.

- The merger of the FCO and DFID has contributed towards stronger policy integration in several cases, and appeared to have been easier in smaller missions or where there was a range of UK interests and perspectives in play and therefore greater balance between the voices of different government departments.
- Despite the disruption associated with internal planning and reorganisation, the FCDO's formation was generally considered beneficial in Somalia and Sudan. For example, ambassadorial oversight of humanitarian and development work was said to have improved in Sudan since the DFID–FCO merger, corporate messaging became more unified, and dealings with the Sudanese government became easier to communicate. In both countries, DFID's footprint and resources – though important – did not overshadow those of other departments. Additionally, there was broad acceptance that development challenges had political and security roots.
- Likewise, UK missions hosting a variety of similarly resourced departments, and which had strong incentives to integrate cross-government cooperation into daily operations, were probably better placed to combine FCO and legacy DFID infrastructure into a unified arrangement. In the case of Kenya, the merger was thought to have increased diplomatic engagement in health-related work, and led to better links between trade and development initiatives.
- In contrast, issues over prioritisation and leadership seem to have arisen when combining DFID Ethiopia's sizeable staff base and budget with a far smaller FCO presence. Although benefits were noticeable over time, with former DFID humanitarian advisers now described as more cognisant of political factors associated with gaining access to the Tigray region, some partners felt the creation of the FCDO had cost the UK, undermining its hard-won reputation for aid and development leadership. This feeling was more prominent in Ethiopia and to some degree in Kenya, both countries having enjoyed long engagement with DFID linked to years of high aid spending levels.
- A frequently referenced issue was a lack of pre-merger planning. Slow implementation, including delays with integrating teams and systems, were frustrations in all countries, with staff morale (and retention) across UK embassies suffering in many cases. Ongoing restructuring has been necessary at different levels since the new FCDO was formed, and considerable time has been taken up with iterative reorganisation and re-strategising, down to

individual embassies and teams.¹⁰⁶ In line with previous research on ‘machinery of government’ changes, all indications are that the creation and refinement of the FCDO will be unfinished business for years to come.¹⁰⁷

Recommendation: Explicit change management processes should be used to guide any further organisational change. Planning should cater for foreseeable risks, draw on the merger’s early lessons and prioritise communicating future direction with external partners.

Finding 5

The UK retains a good reputation across the region for the calibre of its diplomats and development and defence experts, and it has broadly maintained staffing levels despite budget cuts.

- Despite budget cuts and reported staff departures at corporate level,¹⁰⁸ the FCDO and the MoD have maintained similar numbers of staff with a focus on the region between 2015 and 2022, and other departments such as Investment and Trade, have slightly increased their presence in Kenya and Ethiopia. Maintaining staff numbers has provided some ‘damage mitigation’, allowing officials to preserve relationships, provide technical support or exert influence, despite reduced budgets.
- The perceived quality of UK staff has similarly been a stabilising factor. It has helped to protect at least some longstanding networks amid political and budget uncertainties, supplemented by strategic staff placements to facilitate multilateral collaboration. The UK’s influence across multiple issues and sectors could however prove time-limited – research findings suggested that existing ‘clout’ may only be sustainable if a narrower set of priorities is adopted or additional resources are brought to bear. At the same time, the increasing arrival of inexperienced civil servants across regional postings has raised questions over the durability of institutional memory in UK embassies, and the transferability of knowledge, contacts and relationships.

106. See, for example, William Worley, “‘Upheaval and Crisis’: FCDO’s First Year”, *Devex*, 10 September 2021, <<https://www.devex.com/news/upheaval-and-crisis-fcdo-s-first-year-101516>>, accessed 9 July 2023; William Worley, ‘Exclusive: FCDO Undergoes Major Personnel Reforms, Gets Second Top Official’, *Devex*, 17 March 2022, <<https://www.devex.com/news/exclusive-fcdo-undergoes-major-personnel-reforms-gets-second-top-official-102888>>, accessed 6 May 2023; Michael Igoe, ‘Devex Newswire: A Major Shakeup at FCDO’, *Devex*, 18 March 2022, <<https://www.devex.com/news/devex-newswire-a-major-shakeup-at-fcdo-102876>>, accessed 20 June 2023.

107. Grant Dalton, ‘Machinery of Government Changes’, 4 April 2023, <<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/machinery-government-changes>>, accessed 3 July 2023.

108. William Worley, ‘Nearly 100 DFID Advisers have Departed FCDO. Who has Replaced Them?’, *Devex*, 11 January 2022, <<https://www.devex.com/news/nearly-100-dfid-advisers-have-departed-fcdo-who-has-replaced-them-102427>>, accessed 15 May 2023.

Recommendation: Building on lessons from the DFID–FCO merger, ensure that the FCDO’s operating model, including its staff base and handling of external relationships, is optimised to support integrated ways of working in a competitive, post-Brexit context. As part of this, ensure skilled international development professionals are attracted, retained and tasked to work effectively alongside others in pursuit of integrated policy agendas.

Finding 6

The UK is reasonably well regarded as a development, defence and diplomatic actor across the region. Despite this, a range of middle and great powers increasingly offer alternative forms of support to East African governments, which contribute to perceptions of declining UK influence.

- Research showed that although the UK is less well resourced than the EU or the US, it is often credited by its partners with solid technical knowledge, expertise and convening power. This is in part due to the previous work of DFID, but extends beyond development issues. UK defence and security inputs (for example, training) are also well thought of, but there is awareness that UK political sensitivities can lead to cooperation being curtailed or withdrawn, as previously happened in Ethiopia and Sudan.
- UK diplomatic skill and outreach are also well regarded. The UK is seen as less strident than the US, with respondents mentioning the UK’s useful closed-door bilateral work and its presence in a range of diplomatic forums. While the UK is often expected to follow US positions, many feel that the UK can still act as a ‘bridge’ between Washington and other stakeholders.
- Prominent non-Western actors in the region include China and Russia, Turkey and the Gulf states.
- Turkey is seen as focused on commercial and security issues. It has gained a reputation for small-scale investments and a willingness to deal at subnational level, although in Somalia it has successfully combined soft power, direct investment, military assistance, infrastructural development and humanitarian aid to become one of the FGS’s most prominent international partners. Crucially, this crosscuts elite and wider public sentiment, with Turkish officials, business delegates and NGO workers ‘walking the streets’ and immersing themselves in the daily realities of Somali life.¹⁰⁹
- The Gulf States are thought to seek stability that protects investments (for example, land and productive enterprises in Ethiopia and Sudan) and are seen as pursuing ‘cheque-book diplomacy’.¹¹⁰

109. Jones, ‘Mired in Mogadishu’, p. 46.

110. See Jason Mosley, ‘Turkey and the Gulf States in the Horn of Africa: Fluctuating Dynamics of Engagement, Investment and Influence’, Rift Valley Institute, 2021.

- China has a distinctive offer – financing quickly at scale with few conditions, particularly around infrastructure or agriculture. It has had some success framing itself as more generous than traditional donors, including through swift Covid-19 ‘vaccine diplomacy’. Civil society actors in the region often worry that China’s lack of conditionality or interest in accountability issues can fuel corruption or lower technical standards.¹¹¹ More recently, the attractions of its developmental model may also be starting to shift, with loans becoming more expensive, alongside Beijing’s increasing reluctance to fund loss-making ‘white elephant projects’ amid a downturn in its domestic economy.
- Russia was seen as competing on different grounds compared with the UK and the West, due to quite specific security (arms and military cooperation), commercial and political interests. It enjoys residual sympathies due to Soviet support for anti-colonial struggles and longstanding military links. In Ethiopia, Moscow benefits from a shared history of Orthodox Christianity. As with China, there is mutual interest in the principles of non-interference.
- Linked to the arrival or revival of these ‘alternative’ actors, it is sometimes said that Western, and UK influence, is in decline. There are several aspects to this, ranging from the idea that alternative offers are on the table, to the growing self-sufficiency and assertiveness of national leaders in countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia. This perception of relative decline needs to be recognised in its own right, independent of any impact that UK aid cuts or the withdrawal from the EU may have had on the UK’s standing. Frustrations with the West’s past double standards or moral failings also shape views across the region. Yet there is no consensus on whether the UK has found the right balance in terms of ‘pragmatism’ versus ‘principles’. It wins plaudits from some in the region for pursuing ‘practical solutions’, but is seen by others as ‘less principled’ than countries such as Denmark and Sweden, which tend to foreground issues of human rights and gender.

Recommendation: Ensure that forging long-term partnerships with a range of constituencies becomes central to strategies in East Africa and for priority countries elsewhere, backed by sufficient time, resources and incentivising development and retention of regional expertise.

Recommendation: Building on this study, commission formal reviews of the contribution that UK defence engagement and international development efforts can feasibly make to UK foreign policy aims globally, focusing strongly on UK added value and clearer prioritisation.

111. *The Economist*, ‘Chinese Loans and Investment in Infrastructure Have Been Huge’, 20 May 2022.

Finding 7

The UK has established relationships and partnerships with a variety of actors. It often operates effectively through ad hoc groupings of bilateral and multilateral networks in the region and globally, bolstered by envoys and technical specialists.

- Although the UK–Kenya relationship remains strong, the UK’s cultural influence and the perceived value of its international development ‘offer’ seems to be declining. As the UK competes for commercial advantage with China, the US and others, it has arguably shifted towards ‘less abrasive’ terms of engagement and closer alignment to government.
- The UK maintains a range of productive relationships in Ethiopia, but changing political dynamics and the Tigray conflict have upended a previously close partnership with the federal government. Navigating an increasingly polarised environment since 2020, the UK had to work harder to maintain influence and access as it juggled pursuit of humanitarian access, development and trade agendas and exploring ceasefires and peace-talk options.
- The fraught security situation in Somalia makes it hard for foreign donors to build relations beyond reductive, state-centric echo-chambers in FMS palaces or Villa Somalia. Nevertheless, the UK retains a significant voice and exercises comparatively strong links at the subnational level, often acting as a broker for other international stakeholders. With its membership of the Quad and the Quint, the World Bank’s Multi-Partner Fund, the Core Security Partners Group and S6; participation in or chairmanship of several coordination platforms; and position as UN Penholder, the UK has carved a leading diplomatic role and reputation for development expertise that can sometimes catalyse effective responses from others.
- The UK enjoys substantial depth and quality of partnerships both within Sudan and with regional actors. The UK won some praise for its political and technical support to the 2019 transitional government, and its support to debt relief. Many pro-democracy campaigners worry about Western willingness to compromise with Sudan’s military, while others would welcome increased UK engagement. Western influence may be seen as declining relative to that of players such as Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, but a strength in the UK’s approach has until recently been its engagement with such players.

Recommendation: Ensure links and communication between regional and embassy-level officials, including ‘special envoys’, to coordinate advocacy and diplomacy, and better align missions and engagement across the Gulf and Eastern Africa. This includes adequately resourcing envoy positions, streamlining

information flows (across Whitehall and country missions), and providing access to relevant teams.

Recommendation: Push to consolidate a clear strategy for ad hoc groups such as the Quad, the Quint, S6 and Friends of Sudan, working with partners to clarify (and potentially deconflict) their respective roles, resources, membership and mandates.

Finding 8

Between 2019 and 2021, the UK bilateral aid budget was reduced by around 50% across the region. External relationships suffered as funding decisions were arrived at iteratively and were not always well communicated.

- The reduced UK aid budget is probably the most significant variable examined in this project. The speed and extent of cuts damaged the UK's reputation and partnerships in all four countries. While examples were found of cutbacks driving innovation, and relationships with national governments and key partners have endured in most cases, the UK is generally seen as less reliable by many organisations that it has partnered with on international aid and development work (both up- and downstream).
- The UK was not the only donor to have reduced funding in Kenya over the research period, but respondents routinely noted that the scale of cuts (equivalent to 46% between 2019 and 2021)¹¹² lacked any obvious strategic logic and risked diminishing UK capabilities, even in areas where it had previously found success. Despite the recognised need to consolidate procedural and institutional improvements over successive ballot cycles, for instance, stakeholders faced pressure to slash funding for electoral support, detracting from the sustainability of long-term cultural, normative and structural change.
- In Ethiopia, where past UK aid funding had contributed to impressive reductions in the poverty rate, the decrease in UK bilateral aid by over 50% between 2019 and 2021 was poorly received by many stakeholders. Shrinking budgets did in some cases lead to fresh thinking from UK officials about delivery options, for example, focusing minds on how to draw in resources from elsewhere. But the overall drop hampered the ability of the FCDO's implementing partners to plan, deliver and maintain good relations.
- Flows of UK bilateral aid to Somalia rose considerably between 2019 and 2020, but diminished by 56% the following year, with cuts in staple activities including support for public administration, subnational governance and humanitarian relief. Although the UK is still respected and able to deliver impact with well-

112. National Audit Office (NAO), 'Managing Reductions in Official Development Assistance Spending', 31 March 2022, <<https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/managing-reductions-in-official-development-assistance-spending/>>, accessed 18 May 2023.

designed programming (as, for example, on famine relief and stabilisation), the reductions were described by many as detrimental to UK capacity and likely to diminish influence. While UK officials have been recognised for their expertise, capabilities and coordination during the 2017 humanitarian relief effort in Somalia, federal government stakeholders recently criticised the UK for becoming a ‘smaller player’ and neglecting its leadership role.¹¹³ The disruption or scaling down of projects, delays in tendering or launching follow-up programmes, and confusion over long-term funding have reduced confidence in UK commitments. Resource levels are now arguably mismatched to the UK’s long-term state-building ambitions.

- In contrast to Kenya and Ethiopia, UK budget allocations for Sudan increased in 2020, as the UK sought to demonstrably support Khartoum’s political transition,¹¹⁴ becoming Whitehall’s fifth-largest bilateral commitment globally. However, funding levels fell back by roughly 55% in 2021/22,¹¹⁵ due to the 2021 coup, when all non-humanitarian assistance was suspended. Although the UK has traditionally been the largest donor to the UN-run Sudan Humanitarian Fund, today the US, Germany and the Netherlands make larger contributions, leading humanitarian partners to expect a decline in UK influence.

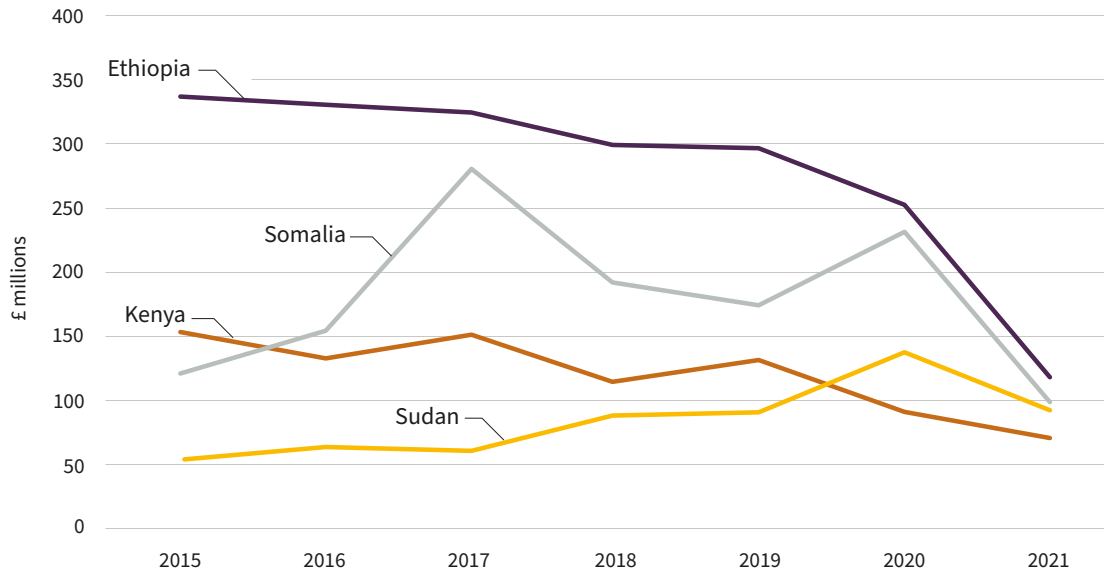
Recommendation: Clarify intentions regarding the 0.7% GNI spending target, including spending priorities in the event of either future budget increases or cutbacks. Ad interim, introduce flexibility by confirming that the current 0.5% GNI spending measure is a floor, not a ceiling.

113. Tracy McVeigh, ‘UK’s Lost Leadership Role Hurts Somalia’s Fight Against Famine, Says Drought Envoy’, *The Guardian*, 10 October 2022.

114. Following the deposition of President Omar Al-Bashir in 2019 and an agreed roadmap for political reform under the steer of a hybrid transitional government, UK spending in Sudan increased significantly from £93 million in 2019 to £139 million in 2020. See OECD, ‘Creditor Reporting System (CRS)’.

115. NAO, ‘Managing Reductions in Official Development Assistance Spending’.

Figure 1: Total UK Net Bilateral ODA (£ Millions) from 2015 to 2021



Sources: Figures for 2015 to 2020 from FCDO, *Annual Report and Accounts 2021–22* (London: The Stationery Office, 2022), Table B.2, p. 257, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fcdo-annual-report-and-accounts-2021-to-2022>>, accessed 22 June 2023. Figures for 2021 from FCDO and UK Aid, ‘Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2021’, last updated March 2023, p. 74, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistics-on-international-development-final-uk-aid-spend-2021>>, accessed 22 June 2023.

Finding 9

Brexit did not significantly impair the UK’s operational effectiveness in the region, but alongside other factors has probably contributed to a perception of declining influence.

Leaving the EU has excluded the UK from country-level EU coordination forums in the region. This means that the UK no longer has a formal role in determining the direction of EU defence, development and humanitarian priorities, nor in agreeing common positions. But this has cut two ways. The UK bilateral aid budget received a boost following EU withdrawal, as member contributions were no longer required of the UK. In terms of diplomatic positioning, UK officials now have a freer hand. In these respects, Brexit appeared to have little overt impact on the UK’s reputation or effectiveness in Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia. Yet media coverage of protracted UK–EU withdrawal negotiations, and

very public politicking around the issue in the UK, did negatively affect perceptions of the UK in the region.¹¹⁶ Some variations were evident across countries:

- While Brexit did not dramatically change UK standing and influence in Kenya, some interviewees argued that it had lost strategic cover – previously able to ‘lead from the back’ on sensitive policy issues in a former colony, the UK now has one fewer channel for exercising influence. When combined with high ministerial turnover and poorly communicated aid reductions, there was also a widespread sense that the UK had become a less predictable partner.
- Coming alongside large aid budget cuts and the end of DFID, leaving the EU was felt by many Ethiopian interviewees who valued the UK and DFID’s track record to have diminished UK influence.
- The UK’s existing relationships in Sudan have weathered Brexit comparatively well. Despite withdrawing from EU members’ meetings, workarounds have been found to coordinate with EU players. The UK’s network of officials operated effectively across multiple forums in Khartoum, the wider region and New York. Active in the UK–US–Norwegian ‘Troika’ and the ‘Quad’ (the UK with the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE), Whitehall appears to have offset its loss of influence over EU policy. Field research showed many believed that UK dexterity and messaging improved after Brexit, although it was argued that UK ministers might have concentrated more on Sudan’s early political transition in 2019 had it not been for Brexit negotiations at that time.
- Respondents in Somalia also noted a diversion of UK diplomatic attention during the negotiation period. Others warned that withdrawing UK personnel from Somalia-facing EU activities could undermine local commitments, in part because UK funding contributions and political advocacy helped drive support for AMISOM/ATMIS in Brussels. However, the approval of successive EU financial packages in 2022 and 2023 appeared to have defused these concerns, at least in the short term.¹¹⁷

Recommendation: Ensure there is sufficient flexibility to continue informal engagement and coordination between UK and EU officials over the long term, particularly at the operational level.

Recommendation: Invest in working groups and bilateral platforms to enable the UK to continue its role as a ‘transatlantic bridge’ between the EU and the US.

116. In addition to these regional variations, it should be noted that UK and international media over the period were simultaneously covering topics that were raised during research as evidence of potential UK ‘decline’, independent of Brexit: a contracting UK economy, ministerial scandals and wrangles over migration policy.

117. European Council, ‘EU Support to Somalia: Council Approves Further Support under the European Peace Facility to the Somali National Army and to the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS)’, press release, 2 March 2023, <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/03/02/eu-support-to-somalia-council-approves-further-support-under-the-european-peace-facility-to-the-somali-national-army-and-to-the-african-union-transition-mission-in-somalia-atmis/>>, accessed 9 August 2023.

Recommendation: Clearly communicate the scope, scale and mechanics of continuing UK–EU cooperation to help defuse perceptions of an isolated, post-Brexit foreign policy, particularly to local audiences.

Finding 10

UK strategies at the country level were sometimes unclear, overly broad or outpaced by contextual changes. The lack of a regional strategy also remains a significant gap, given the transnational nature of the opportunities and challenges facing Eastern Africa.

- Research suggests that the UK could improve its efficacy across Eastern Africa by looking afresh at strategy and providing support for implementation. At the country and sub-regional level, strategies were often vague or outdated, with contentious assumptions, disparities between goals and resources, and a lack of plausible delivery plans contributing to confusion and inefficiency. Similarly, theories of change, shared objectives and priorities were not always well articulated or connected, and at the regional level there appears to be little in the way of a viable roadmap. Given the transnationalised dynamics of local insecurity, development, politics and economic systems – especially across comparatively deprived borderlands – the lack of an East Africa strategy is a serious omission. It is also true that a policy of integrated working across the ‘3Ds’, linking to other policy areas (for example, trade, science and technology) as prescribed in IR21 and IR23, is complex to execute and cannot be driven by rhetoric alone.
- Despite the Strategic Partnership, the hierarchy of UK objectives in Kenya was not always well framed or understood – although in reality defence and trade relations increasingly appeared to overshadow concerns around accountability or human development. Additionally, there were indications that UK defence engagement and relationship building would benefit from being placed within a clearer overarching strategy, backed up by appropriate political outreach, although this process may reportedly already be under review as the MoD looks to clarify how ‘persistent engagement’ will function in practice.
- It was not clear whether UK action in Ethiopia was guided by an up-to-date detailed strategy that matched well-articulated goals and interests to available resources and political will. A wide range of engagements, some in tension with one another, had been kept in play for some years amid a deteriorating context. The UK is not alone here – most Western actors have struggled to adapt to the pace of developments across the country.
- Similarly, recent events in Sudan are prompting renewed scrutiny of Western and UK strategy. Sudanese interviewees were often sceptical of international

efforts to integrate military and security stakeholders into transitional government arrangements, despite the UK's ability to dialogue with 'all sides'. Others argued that UK and other Western actors had focused unduly on technocratic economic reforms during the failed 2019–21 political transition – at the expense of expanding non-elite networks and deepening political analysis to help chart a long-term path towards democratisation.

- Despite reduced resources, Whitehall's strategy towards Somalia has proved fairly consistent. Formally committed to the STP, the UK and other 'likeminded' countries are continuing to back a 'good enough' federal government capable of containing Al-Shabaab. That said, some query the execution and underlying assumptions of this approach, particularly the feasibility of building a stable state without prior societal and clan agreement on basic political questions. In the absence of local buy-in, ownership and shared alignment, the creation of artificial systems dependent on external resourcing raises the risk of aid diversion and economic extraversion that may disrupt or undermine Somali-led peacebuilding. At the same time, a reduction or withdrawal of donor support would likely precipitate a complete government collapse akin to that in Afghanistan. Amid new priorities in Ukraine, implausible timelines, international fatigue, and deeply embedded political and developmental challenges, the gulf between the strategic ambitions and hard realities of UK engagement seem to be growing.

Recommendation: Develop integrated strategies for UK engagement with priority African countries and regions, including those in Eastern Africa. Guided by high-level policy such as IR23 and NSC decisions and informed by the context, these strategies should clearly articulate interests, values and objectives, while offering a means to revisit assumptions, possible dilemmas and trade-offs.

Recommendation: Measures could include setting shared objectives, training (for example, the FCDO diplomatic academy), work shadowing or issuing good practice guides.

Conclusion

This paper has set out research findings on the UK's use of international development, diplomacy and defence engagement in Eastern Africa from 2015 to 2022. It finds that the region has not been allotted the resources or level of attention initially signalled by IR21. It is notable that the UK has made progress on a number of its policy agendas despite domestic, regional and global challenges. The UK's best results often seem to derive from long-term engagements. These have generated contextual understanding and broad-based relationships that could be leveraged in future for positive change. With strong cultural ties and a track record of providing life-saving humanitarian assistance and development and defence know-how, many in the region recognise the UK's contributions and might welcome increased engagement from the UK on genuinely shared priorities.

Nevertheless, in a post-Brexit world of increasing geopolitical competition, the UK will have to face questions about its positioning towards Africa. The research surfaces important questions concerning the nature of UK–Africa relations and the role of aid, development and defence engagement within an integrated foreign policy. For example, policy statements in favour of 'integration' or 'partnerships', while useful, do not in themselves constitute an effective strategy. With a contracting resource base, positive results may become harder to demonstrate in an increasingly competitive and transactional environment. African governments also now have a wider array of potential partners and greater leverage in shaping foreign engagement. This fact, together with policy decisions such as a reduced aid budget, contributes to perceptions of declining UK influence within the region. In the face of this, the UK will need to communicate its added value towards Africa very clearly.

As the initial struggles around changes from Brexit to the FCDO merger recede, new opportunities could emerge for the UK to forge effective two-way partnerships. The UK should now clearly articulate its policy priorities towards the region and Africa writ large and establish a two-way dialogue with African partners at government and societal level on shared priorities. Whereas UK approaches were previously characterised by the use of aid for poverty reduction, the scope of UK development engagement is broadening, focusing more explicitly on the national interest and on establishing wider partnerships.

As the country moves through its next electoral cycle by 2024, the UK government would do well to consider how the UK can pursue its significant diplomatic, security and development interests towards Africa in light of this project's findings and recommendations, as well as their implications for engagement elsewhere.

About the Authors

Simon Rynn is Senior Research Fellow for Africa in the International Security Studies group at RUSI. His experience covers peacebuilding, stabilisation, security and justice, de-mining, humanitarian issues, governance and small-arms control. His current research focus is on issues of geopolitics, civil–military relations and evolving approaches to conflict management and resolution in Africa. Prior to RUSI, he held advisory and senior management positions with the UK government, the UN, the private sector and international NGOs. Simon holds an MSc in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a BA in Philosophy from the University of Leeds.

Michael Jones is a Research Fellow in RUSI's Terrorism and Conflict team, focusing on political violence, conflict and violent extremism in Eastern Africa. He has led investigative fieldwork across numerous countries, including Sudan and Kenya, and managed projects focusing on preventing and countering violent extremism and wider conflict systems across the Horn. He is a co-author of *Human Trafficking: An Organised Crime?* (Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2019) and is an accredited member of the Foreign & Commonwealth Development Office's conflict adviser cadre.

Larry Attree is a globally recognised expert on peace, conflict and security issues. Former Head of Global Policy and Advocacy at Saferworld, Larry has over two decades' experience, and helped craft global agreements on peace, governance and development themes including the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, the Busan Partnership and the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals. As architect of Saferworld's peacebuilding responses to crises and threats programme, Larry has authored and edited numerous studies on stabilisation, statebuilding, counter-terrorism, countering violent extremism, peace, human rights, security, justice and development.

He has a long track record in peace, rights and security strategy and programme design, management, training and evaluation, conflict research and analysis, high-level policy advice, advocacy and coalition building. He has lived and worked for peace in the Balkans, South Asia, Africa and the Pacific with the UN, the OSCE, Saferworld and others.