Interpreting Coalition Foreign Policy

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‘...it became necessary for Mr. Sparkler to repair to England, and take his appointed part in the expression and direction of its genius, learning, commerce, spirit, and sense. The land of Shakespeare, Milton, Bacon, Newton, Watt, the land of a host of past and present abstract philosophers, natural philosophers, and subduers of Nature and Art’ (Dickens [1855-7] 2008: 604-05).

Under David Cameron’s leadership from December 2005, the Conservative Party established a ‘new’ foreign policy agenda based around a set of beliefs about Britain’s identity, agency and strategic global positioning which it dubbed the ‘liberal Conservative’ approach to foreign affairs. As Cameron described it in a landmark speech in 2006: ‘Liberal – because I support the aim of spreading freedom and democracy, and support humanitarian intervention. Conservative – because I recognize the complexities of human nature, and am sceptical of grand schemes to remake the world’ (Cameron 2006; see also Hague 2009). The Conservative general election manifesto used it as the organizing frame for the foreign policy section, explaining that it would ‘champion the cause of democracy and the rule of law at every opportunity’ whilst being ‘hard-headed and practical, dealing with the world as it is and not as we wish it were’ (Conservative Party 2010: 109).

Foreign policy does not appear to have been a controversial issue in the negotiations between the two parties that concluded on 11 May (Coalition Agreement 2010). Discussion of Liberal Conservatism was notable by its absence from the foreign policy section of the coalition’s programme for government, published on 20 May (HM Government 2010b: 20). By contrast, the divisive issue of British-EU relations necessitated careful attention from the two sets of negotiators. Despite it coming to represent the official coalition approach to foreign policy, liberal Conservatism clearly had the potential to develop into a problematic organizing narrative for the government because the persistent dilemma of ‘decline’ (Harvey 2010; Wilkin 2013: 203) threatened to undermine Britain’s capacity to exercise the global leadership role envisaged in liberal Conservative discourse.

Recognition of the acute dilemmas associated with making foreign policy in an age of austerity makes the close study of liberal Conservatism important theoretically, empirically and methodologically. Theoretically and empirically, an interpretive approach helps us make sense of the ways in which national leaders act on the basis of a webs of beliefs they hold about their nation’s role in the world. Liberal Conservative discourse is complex and multidimensional. It ranges freely over history and identity, conflates hard and soft power capabilities (notably Cameron 2006), carefully balances values and interests, and advocates sets of values that should be upheld by members of the international community. Furthermore, it helps us appreciate the ideational foundations on which they develop sets of foreign policy practices to counter allegations of decline and respond to security threats as they see them. Significantly, the ideas explored below lend themselves to an interpretive method of collapsing the ‘inside/outside’ distinction in the study of international relations because
speculations on the ‘national character’ always appear to be the starting point from which British leaders elucidate their foreign policy priorities.

Methodologically, the paper proposes that one fruitful approach to interpreting foreign policy is via a form of political speech analysis I choose to call public policy discourse analysis (PPDA). This method gives the user the conceptual tools to identify the traditions working in the background (in this case a time-honoured conception of British identity and its exceptional global role), against which elite beliefs are formed and remoulded in response to dilemmas (in this case economic decline). Significantly, PPDA rejects a deterministic appreciation of the power of narrative structures. It instead shows how agents actively and consciously construct new rationalities in response to dilemmas as they perceive them to challenge existing beliefs. It furthers an interpretive research agenda because it treats humans as agents not objects, ‘actively and collaboratively constructing (and deconstructing, meaning critically assessing and changing) their polities, societies and cultures…At the same time, those same political and cultural contexts frame these agents’ possibilities for thought, discourse and action’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 46). Crucially, these background structures or traditions frame but do not determine the beliefs and actions of individual agents.

The argument put forward below is that liberal Conservatism draws on durable traditions of thought about Britain’s role in the world that have been implicitly agreed upon by leading UK political parties for decades (Shlaim 1977; Kennedy 1985; Clarke 1988). It adapts previous Conservative Party foreign policy by according greater weight to ethics and values in foreign policy. It also develops later, Gordon Brown era, New Labour foreign policy thinking by stressing the need for stable economic foundations on which to execute diplomacy and the use of aid to promote global security. In a more thoroughgoing way than both, however, liberal Conservatism attempts to come to terms with the nature of the limits on Britain’s agency in an era characterized by dramatically reduced material resources and an increasingly restricted capacity for idealational entrepreneurship. It recognizes that new global actors – states and non-state – are less and less likely unhesitatingly to accept the legitimacy and moral authority of British and/or ‘Western’ liberal democratic values and institutions.

Interpreting liberal Conservatism
This paper develops an emerging body of interpretive work on recent British foreign policy (Daddow and Gaskarth 2011) and the foreign policy thinking of David Cameron and William Hague in particular. In a 2008 article, Klaus Dodds and Stuart Elden explored New Labour’s foreign policy legacy and the apparent influence of the right-leaning Henry Jackson Society to suggest that Cameron and Hague were likely to ground their foreign policy on an activist, interventionist posture (Dodds and Elden 2008). In a 2011 article, Matt Beech looked to the Conservative foreign policy tradition more specifically, using elite interviews to gauge Conservative thought on such vital topics as the ‘special relationship’ and the role of sovereign states in the contemporary global order (Beech 2008). Øivind Bratberg’s account of foreign policy under Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac identified the core elements of the British tradition of seeking ‘great power’ centring on ‘a privilege for Anglo-American relations, with NATO as corollary; insular reserve towards the European continent; a maintained global
presence with special preference for the Commonwealth; a policy based on pragmatism rather than principle; and, finally, a liberal belief in international trade’ (Bratberg 2011: 331; see also Curtis 2004: 276).

Written half way through the five year term of the 2010-15 government, this paper adds a vital stock of new knowledge to help us understand the beliefs underpinning liberal Conservatism, how these beliefs have drawn upon the great power tradition, and how unexpected dilemmas posed by the economic crisis have prompted these beliefs to be refashioned around the idea of Britain being a great global ‘influence’. The paper interprets liberal Conservatism through discourse analysis of primary sources, the aim being ‘to understand how specific human beings in particular times and locales make sense of their worlds’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 10). The descriptor ‘discourse’ designates that this is qualitative rather than quantitative or summative analysis. It is a form of ‘directed content analysis’ (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 1281) which identifies the textual markers and conceptual hooks on which discourse producers hang their webs of belief about the nature of ‘reality’ (see Chilton 2004: 54; Milliken 1999: 229; Moore 2007: 20; Taylor 2009: 5).

Initially developed to study the beliefs underpinning Labour Party European policy discourse (Broad and Daddow 2010; Daddow 2011) the PPDA method comprises three processes: text selection, data coding and reporting. The main texts chosen for analysis were set piece speeches on foreign policy delivered by the prime minister and foreign secretary before and since entering government. Although discourse analysis can equally be applied to other official pronouncements, such as election manifestoes, government white papers and reports, internet blogs, social media, press conferences or statements to parliament (on the latter see for example Dyson 2009), this paper privileges the spoken over the written word for reasons of space. The speech data was coded to offer up answers to two research questions which were then broken down into their component parts for the purposes of identifying the relevant keywords.

Research question 1 investigates beliefs about British identity: What role in the world did Cameron and Hague identify for Britain in the modern international system? This was broken down into four sub-questions voiced in the first person to encourage interpretive thinking. 1a, What kind of Britain are we? 1b, What kind of Britain do we want to be? 1c, What kind of world are we in? 1d, What kind of world do we want it to be? Research question 2 asks, What is beliefs the balance of interests and values in coalition foreign policy? It is also broken down to promote interpretive thinking around the following sub-questions. 2a, What is the British national interest? 2b, What values do the British hold dear? 2c, How are British interests and values best expressed on the world stage?

The speeches were coded by hand identifying apparent keywords which were then assessed in context to determine their relevance in answering the above research questions. For example, to help answer question 1a (from which beliefs about Britishness does liberal Conservatism work), words and phrases relating to supposedly unique British ‘assets’ or innate advantages were identified, including words such as ‘diplomacy’, ‘active’, ‘outward facing’ and so on.
When judged in context, not all keywords help address the main or sub-research questions about foreign policy per se, and have not featured at the reporting stage. For instance, in Cameron’s first Lord Mayor’s Banquet speech (2010) he spoke of wishing to create a ‘competitive corporate tax regime’. However, if Cameron talked about the need for Britain to stay ‘competitive in a global race’, casting light on his usage of the word in its Realist international relations guise, that usage of the term competitive would be included at the reporting stage.

It is to the reporting of the findings on the beliefs underpinning liberal Conservatism that we now turn, beginning with British identity, moving onto the nature of the contemporary global arena, and finally studying the balance struck in liberal Conservatism between interests and values, as well as how they inter-relate in the discourse.

**Britain’s role in the world and the world’s influence on Britain**

‘We are conscious that our international role is no isolated subject. In such a changed world, with such stark threats, how we react to them and how Britain uses its abilities is a crucial part of who we are as a country, how we regard ourselves, and what it will mean in the next generation to be British’ (Hague 2009).

As the section epigraph above suggests, the main finding in this part of the paper is that liberal Conservatism is the product of active dialogue with Britain’s history and the idea of a cohesive British identity. It works from these to create normative prescriptions about the manner in which Britain should engage with the rest of the world to extend its interests and protect its identity. In this, the coalition government strongly echoes New Labour and many a previous government on the qualities that mark Britain out for a global leadership role. For example, as Chancellor of the Exchequer then Prime Minister in 1997-2010 Brown frequently waxed lyrical on the ‘British genius’, praising its ‘inventiveness and creativity; a capacity for hard work alongside…adaptability…; a culture of learning and a belief in fair play…; and an ability to look outwards’ (Brown 1997). Brown suggested in November 2006 that ‘in the DNA’ of all the most successful British companies were those same qualities that made the British people and the British nation great (Brown 2006).

Liberal Conservatism works the great power-identity nexus in similar fashion by constructing foreign policy as the expression/imposition of essential British qualities on the international stage. Cameron and Hague said that foreign policy mirrors a global outlook and yearning for ‘free trade’ that is ‘in our DNA’ (Cameron 2010; Cameron 2012) or ‘deep in our DNA as a nation’ (Hague 2012). Why is this important? ‘Because the most powerful natural resources we have are our people’ (Cameron 2012) and the point of a liberal democratic foreign policy should be to encourage a national public to express its wishes fairly and unencumbered, via the government, on the world stage.

To answer the question, 1a, *What kind of Britain are we?*, liberal Conservatism accents two themes: innate British ‘assets and advantages’ (Hague 2009) and the ‘personality’ these assets
enable the British to upload to the international arena. Cameron described it in his first Lord Mayor’s Banquet speech using exactly the same descriptor favoured by Gordon Brown three years earlier: ‘Our foreign policy is one of hard-headed internationalism’ (Cameron 2010; Brown 2007). This posture is said to flow naturally from a variety of British resources derived from its geography, imperial past and martial history (see also HM Government 2010a).

First, there is a set of ‘the hard power of our military’ and the nation’s ‘brilliant armed forces’ (Cameron 2010; Cameron 2011; Hague 2009). Second, Britain remains ‘a great economic power’ and a ‘great trading force in the world’ (Cameron 2010) because it is home to ‘one of the most open economies on earth’ (Cameron 2011) centring on the City of London: one of the world’s leading financial and trading centres which helps ‘power the world economy’ (Cameron 2011; Cameron 2012). On top of these: ‘We sit at the heart of the world’s most powerful institutions, from the G8 and the G20, to NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], the Commonwealth, and the UN Security Council’ (Cameron 2010; see also Hague 2009). Britain’s bilateral relations with the US and EU are both listed as further sources of support, especially acting as a bridgehead to the continent: ‘the easiest access to the European market’ (Cameron 2012; see also Hague 2009).

Ranking nations globally using a definition of power as the possession and use of material capabilities and resources will be familiar to those acquainted with early post-Second World War Realist International Relations theory (notably Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1959). This tradition did not ignore the subtler dimensions of power (Morris 2011: 327) but it certainly privileged them over ‘soft’ power (on which see Joseph Nye 2004), because it assumed that great power rank could not be ensured on the basis of soft power alone. Given the mismatch in the size of US and UK armed forces in the post-1945, as well as the countries’ contrasting economic fortunes, it is no surprise that the British have adapted the tradition by taking a more flexible approach to the question of where its global power and influence lay. The great power tradition has been reworked around the idea that the country can ‘punch above its weight’ in foreign affairs (alluded to in Hague 2009). Not for Cameron a story of decline: ‘What I have seen in my first six months as Prime Minister is a Britain at the centre of all the big discussions’ (Cameron 2010).

Supplementing the materialist conception of British strengths, then, are many ‘soft’ factors that help Britain ‘make the most of its still great advantages’ (Hague 2010; see also HM Government 2010a). First, there is English as ‘one of the great languages of humanity’ (Hague 2009; see also Cameron 2010). Significantly, English is ‘the global language of business’ (Cameron 2012), gaining added influence through institutions such as the BBC (Hague 2010). Second, there is the ‘intercontinental reach of our time zone’ (Cameron 2010) whereby ‘you can trade with Asia in the morning and America in the afternoon’ (Cameron 2012). Third, in the knowledge economy, Britain benefits from its ‘world-class universities’ (Cameron 2010; see also Hague 2010), a ‘pioneering, buccaneering spirit’ (Cameron 2012) and the spirit of innovation that introduced to the world ‘the modern computer and the World Wide Web’ (Cameron 2012). Fourth, there is the wider benefit to be gleaned from the ‘cultural impact’ of such institutions as the British Council and ‘our great museums’
Finally, there is the British system of government, incorporating ‘a civil service and a diplomatic service which are admired over the world for their professionalism and their impartiality’ (Cameron 2010). Comparing this list of assets with the Dickensian vision from 1855 (see the start of the paper) we can see that this is a relatively stable background tradition of thought about English/British identity that liberal Conservatism updates in line with its beliefs about the nature of Britain’s place in the contemporary global political economy.

Cameron and Hague thus combine beliefs informed by the great power tradition with developments in academic theories of ‘power’ by stressing the ‘soft’ power dimensions of Britain’s contemporary claims to be an influential global actor. Cameron and Hague believe that Britain’s hard material capabilities, combined with its ‘assets’ or ‘USPs’, have been handed down through history and remain flexible enough to adapt to modern challenges. These internal assets are the backdrop against which they construct the British on the world stage as exhibiting two principal characteristics. First, Britain is a great economic power which makes light of its size and geographic positioning by being ‘open’ rather than insular (Cameron 2011; 2012), ‘outward-facing’ (Cameron 2010) or ‘outward-looking’ (Cameron 2011). Second, Britain is no shrinking violet internationally because it has an ‘instinct to be self-confident and active well beyond our shores’ (Cameron 2010). The prominent New Labour belief in the rectitude of Britain’s global ‘engagement’ is a strong theme within liberal Conservatism: ‘When we see an opportunity we go for it’ (Cameron 2012; on New Labour’s push for global ‘engagement’ rather than ‘isolation’ see Daddow 2011).

Understanding the great power tradition helps us appreciate how Cameron and Hague address the second research question, 1b, What kind of Britain do liberal Conservatives want to fashion? Unsurprisingly the answer is, more of the same ‘greatness’, even if that now has to be achieved in a post-imperial context, because: ‘we do constantly have to adapt’ (Cameron 2010). In Hague’s judgement: ‘The country that is purely reactive in foreign affairs is in decline. We must understand the changes around us and adapt to meet them’ (Hague 2010). The first part of the adaptation process entails a shift in belief in Britain’s world role, from coercive global power to persuasive global influence: ‘There is no reason why the rise of new economic powers should lead to a loss of British influence in the world’, nor a reduction in ‘military power’, said Cameron in 2010 (Cameron 2010). Not for liberal Conservatives the option of ‘strategic shrinkage’ or acceptance of a role which could be ‘set to decline’ (Hague 2010). Rather, ‘it is our contention that Britain must seek to retain her [sic] influence wherever possible and in some places seek to extend it’ (Hague 2009; Hague 2010). The switch from blunt coercive power to the hope that ‘we can use our influence’ (Cameron 2011) indicates the nature of the identity-policy nexus driving liberal Conservatism: ‘This country has always been at its best when it projects its influence’ (Cameron 2011).

The second part of the move from global power to global influence relies on a cascade of characteristics that liberal Conservatism wants to instill into British foreign policy. One is the recommendation that Britain be proactive, because global interdependence ‘is creating huge
new opportunities for the countries that are able to seize them’ (Cameron 2010; see also Hague 2010). As the prime minister put it a year later, ‘change brings opportunities’ (Cameron 2011). Making the most of these openings requires that Britain is ambitious: ‘We are choosing ambition’ (Cameron 2010). It requires, moreover, that Britain be ‘decisive, strategic’ and ‘leading from the front’, including on creating new international trade agreements (Cameron 2012). Finally, and wrapping this section up on British identity now and in the future, liberal Conservatism rejects any form of ‘isolation or ‘going it alone’, just as it does the ‘progressive pre-emption’ of the later Blair years (Blair 2006). It promotes a Britain that is confident to ‘reach out to the world’ and which is: ‘Open. Outward looking. Engaged’ (Cameron 2011). Liberal Conservatism envisages a Britain which does not impose its will by power when economic inducements and patient, skillful diplomacy can be brought to bear on policy problems.

Question 1c, What kind of world does Britain act in?, is one which British elites have had more trouble answering, at least since the upheavals end of the Cold War and the removal of an existential threat to Britain's territorial integrity (Daddow and Gaskarth 2013). The fall of the Berlin Wall, the ‘rise’ or ‘deepening’ of globalization, the 2001 terror attacks on the US and the London bombings in 2005 are just some of the global events that have helped British decision-makers reconfigure their beliefs about security practices. In particular, the collapse of faith in the prospects for a values-based liberal peace at the ‘end of history’ means the downsides as well as the upsides of globalization have received increasingly prominent billing in elite speeches. In this regard, 9/11 is widely held to have been ‘a wake-up call’, ushering in a series of ‘frightening new challenges’ (Cameron 2006) by creating a ‘world of interconnected threats’ (Hague 2010).

Cameron and Hague’s speeches contain two mutually supporting sets of beliefs about how to safeguard national security in ‘an age of uncertainty’ (HM Government 2010a). In the first place, liberal Conservatism works from the assumption that the modern international political economy is crucially shaped by the forces of ‘globalization’ (see Bevir, Hall and Daddow 2013). The defining feature of this ‘new’ world is that it is ‘interconnected’ and home to a ‘world of restless markets’ (Cameron 2010). It also means that ‘others’ problems are our problems too’ (Cameron 2011). The echoes of the Blair ‘doctrine of international community’ from 1999 barely need spelling out. ‘Globalisation’, Blair said in Chicago, ‘has transformed our economies and our working practices’; foreign policy issues have domestic ramifications and vice-versa. Significantly: ‘We are all internationalists now, whether we like it or not’ (Blair 1999; emphasis added). Cameron spoke of the ‘huge changes sweeping our world’ and noted his privileged position of being one of the ‘few’ British prime ministers who ‘will have dealt with a world that is changing so fast’ (Cameron 2010).

Liberal Conservatism also recognises the downsides as well as the upsides of globalization brought about by ‘interconnectedness’, whereby ‘threats originating in one part of the world become threats in all parts of the world’ (Cameron 2010). It depicts hard and soft security concerns. Soft threats are threats to the economy, for example to the City from cyber attacks (Cameron 2010). Hard threats challenge British interests more generally and can be
immediate or longer-term, real or perceived. In 2010 Cameron gave the example of a ‘hard’ threat in the form of an explosive device found at East Midlands Airport in the UK. This ‘viable and dangerous bomb’ originated in the Yemen, was carried to the UAE and thence onto Britain via Germany (Cameron 2010). Liberal Conservatism thus subscribes to the further belief that ‘failed states’ are not containable within sovereign borders, they leak out to affect the international community as a whole. Somalia was the example used in Cameron’s 2011 speech: ‘a failed state that directly threatens British interests’ defined in terms of: civilians (kidnappings of tourists and aid workers), trade (routes being disrupted by piracy), migration, and ideology (‘minds poisoned by radicalism’) (Cameron 2011). Meanwhile, instability in countries such as Libya ‘underlined the need for us to reshape our armed forces as rapidly as possible’ because it flagged the need for ‘a different kind of military to meet different kinds of threat’ (Cameron 2011).

Acknowledgement of the downsides as well as the upsides of globalization has helped inform Cameron’s belief that Britain has – unwillingly – entered a ‘global race’ (Cameron 2012). It also seems to be informed, albeit not expressly, by belief in the ‘US decline’ thesis and is characterized by an appreciation of multipolarity brought about by a combination of the rise of new economic powers (Cameron 2010) and ‘new countries’ in general (Cameron 2012). The global race is constructed as a threatening affair. ‘It is a moment of reckoning for every country. Sink or swim. Do or decline’. Economics are a big part of the race ‘for high knowledge, high value goods’ (Cameron 2012). All the ‘power of national government’ Cameron has argued, needs to ‘get behind what works and to position our key sectors so that they have the best chance of winning in the global race’ (Cameron 2012).

Having established a pessimistic appreciation of the contemporary global arena, liberal Conservatism incorporates elements of a normative vision of the kind of world Britain would like to exist in, answering question 1d. While mostly predictable, it contains one novel twist on post-1945 British foreign policy discourse more generally. Liberal Conservatism draws on the great power tradition by asserting that Britain’s identity, interests and values are coterminous with global values and interests. However, it also reconfigures elite beliefs by recognizing the dilemma of severe economic decline and the reality that as a middle-ranking power Britain necessarily ‘influences’ the world rather more subtly than it once did. Indeed, the normative component of liberal Conservatism is mainly evident in what it says about how the EU needs to change, and we are left to extrapolate from that to the wider global context.

In 2011 Cameron said that the kind of Europe ‘we’ – the British presumably – want ‘is outward-looking – with its eyes to the world not gazing inwards’. It should possess the ‘flexibility of a network not the rigidity of a bloc’, which ‘values national identity’ and ‘diversity’ as a ‘source of strength’. Alluding to the famous tradition of ‘pragmatism’ in British diplomacy (Clarke 1988: 84; Meyer 2010), Cameron added that he wanted to avoid the EU becoming ‘an abstract end in itself’. In other words, theory should be informed by ‘reality’ not vice-versa. He continued that segment of the 2011 Lord Mayor’s Banquet speech by signalling a rupture with past beliefs, signalled by the phrase ‘I feel this very personally’ (Cameron 2011). What follows is worth quoting at length:
The attitudes of my predecessors at this dinner, in previous decades, were understandably shaped by the events of 1945, and the need to secure peace on our continent. The experiences of the Second World War gave birth to the European Union we have today. But for me, 1989 is the key date – when Europe tore down the Iron Curtain, and came together as democratic nations working together across our continent (Cameron 2011).

Cameron’s periodization, with its ‘beginning’ at 1989, indicates that he is challenging the historical theory of his predecessors including, via his Iron Curtain reference, the usually ubiquitous Winston Churchill (Toye 2008). He upgrades post-Cold War developments to make the case for a modern EU in a liberal international community of sovereign states.

This novel take on elite ‘Western’ constructions of global history signals how agents can and do play around with existing traditions which they use to inform, but not determine, their beliefs in response to dilemmas caused either by unexpected occurrences (such as 9/11) or the discovery of unexpected findings about some other aspect of perceived ‘reality’ (for instance, heightened awareness of the downsides of globalization). In this case, Cameron has set up a site of ‘resistance’ within his discourse, which he can exploit for personal and national gain by challenging the stories the EU tells itself and the world about what kind of global actor it is. He also uses this to create normative space between himself and previous British leaders, privileging his ability to speak on behalf of the nation in the ‘new’ world. Having explored liberal Conservative discourse on British identity and role in the contemporary global, the next part of the paper will identify how Cameron and Hague configure the balance between values and interests in their foreign policy rhetoric.

**Values and interests**

‘We will use our influence in the world to pursue our own interest and that of common humanity’ (Hague 2011)

Liberal Conservatism integrates values into British foreign policy but these are very much framed in terms of a consideration of the interests which are ultimately believed to be the most appropriate drivers of foreign policy practice. This weighting towards interests is manifest in the speeches’ ‘summary’ passages on foreign policy. In 2009 Hague defined foreign policy as ‘the protection and promotion of our national interest’ (Hague 2009). In his 2010 Lord Mayor’s Banquet speech Cameron defended the ‘hard-headed’ approach to foreign policy on the grounds that: ‘It will focus like a laser on defending and advancing Britain’s national interest’ (Cameron 2010). The objective clearly, and understandably, runs through the speeches. In 2011 Cameron spoke of ‘focussing our foreign policy on one objective: promoting Britain’s national interest’. In 2012 Cameron articulated the ambition as ‘standing up for our interests in the world’ (Cameron 2012). By answering the four research questions on values and interests we can understand the beliefs on which Cameron and Hague draw to inform this element of their foreign policy discourse.
The opening question in this part is 2a, *How do liberal Conservatives define ‘the national interest’?* On the one hand, Cameron suggests ‘our national interest is easily defined. It is to ensure our future prosperity and to keep our country safe in the years ahead’ (Cameron 2010). So, the national interest has economic and hard security dimensions; in the former realm, especially, it is about ‘making sure British interests get heard’ (Cameron 2011). On the other hand, Cameron argues that ‘our national interests are affected more than ever by events well beyond our shores’ and that is the reason ‘why we need to maintain a global foreign policy’ (Cameron 2010). Liberal Conservatism thus tries to rationalize the tension between defining the national interest and safeguarding it in an interconnected global political economy where the nation-state shares ‘power’ with many other actors in the international system.

*This is where values enter liberal Conservative discourse,* helping us answer question 2b. In the first place Cameron constructs values as essentially linked to British identity through the ages: ‘And we have values – national values that swept slavery from the seas, that stood up to both fascism and communism and that helped spread democracy and human rights around the planet’. These self-same values ‘will drive us to do good around the world’ (Cameron 2010). Note the lack of choice in the use here of the imperative ‘will’ – not ‘might’ or ‘should’. Hague’s refrain has been the same, although he chooses to call this ‘enlightened national interest’ (for example Hague 2010). The gist is in a rhetorical question to which the answer is self-evident: ‘Now would Britain ever be happy as a nation if we partly or largely retired from trying to influence world events’, followed by a familiar list of Britain’s normative achievements on slavery, as well as charity, development and openness to refugees and standing up to tyranny (Hague 2009; Hague 2011). The imperative is there for a reason, exhibiting the liberal Conservative belief in the rectitude of Blair’s doctrine of international community: ‘in today’s world, others’ problems are our problems too’ (Cameron 2011). A successful foreign policy is ‘one that both helps us and helps others’ (Cameron 2011).

Having explained the general outline of the liberal Conservative take on interests and values in British foreign policy, the paper will now delve into the detail of how Cameron and Hague answer questions 2c and 2d: *how the two components of British foreign policy should best be promoted.* The liberal Conservative depiction of UK interests has some familiar components underpinning some more novel beliefs.

The familiarity comes in the form of Churchillian ‘three circles’ or great power tradition of positioning the UK at the ‘centre’ of global power and influence – a pivotal power (Daddow and Gaskarth 2011). The previous section detailed how liberal Conservatives depict the institutional configuration underpinning Britain’s global influence so we will concentrate now on the main bilateral relationships that go into the mix: the US and EU, as problematic as it may be, theoretically, to treat the EU as a rational actor. The US is dealt with in characteristic fashion, via talk of a ‘deep and close’, ‘special’ or ‘unbreakable alliance’ between London and Washington (Cameron 2006; Hague 2010). ‘We will continue to build on our special relationship with America. It is not just special; it is crucial, because it is based on solid
practical foundations such as cooperation on defence, counter-terrorism and intelligence’ (Cameron 2010).

The suggestion here is that US-UK relations are founded on shared values and outlook (the ‘special’ part – helped by the English language) and, moreover, that those same values help promote the national interests of both (the ‘hard’ power triad introduced at the end of the sentence). Together, common US-UK values and interests help the cause of ‘common humanity’ in general (Cameron 2006). It is a form of unofficial liberal democratic union for the shared purpose of furthering small ‘c’ conservative goals in foreign affairs in an international realm of ‘unceasing struggle’ (Hall and Rengger 2005: 75-76). The only other country elevated to the category of ‘special’ in this discourse has been India (for instance Hague 2009), illustrating liberal Conservatism’s wish to revivify ‘that great institution the Commonwealth’ (Hague 2011) and build deeper bilateral relations with emerging powers. Hence, the ‘special relationship’ is a relatively uncontested element of the discourse of liberal Conservatism.

Historically, the Conservative Party, like all leading UK political parties has had much trouble developing a coherent policy towards, and narrative about, the ‘place’ of the EU in British foreign policy. Liberal Conservatism is at pains to depict this as an interest-based relationship with a focus on the economic merits of being part of the Single European Market (SEM) with Britain as the ‘gateway’ to European markets (Cameron 2010). Liberal Conservative discourse on the EU exhibits none of the affection for the EU evident in its description of the ‘special relationship’ between London and Washington. On Europe, Cameron asserted in 2010: ‘we are constructive and firm partners, using our membership of the EU to defend and advance UK interests’ (Cameron 2010). It is a simple case of finances, with EU membership the result of pragmatic and calculated decision-making: ‘The strength of our own economy is closely linked to the rest of Europe’ (Cameron 2011).

Within this appraisal of Britain’s EU policy comes the clearest assertion that this is a relationship needed for Realist purposes not Liberal (Democrat?) affectations. Cameron personalized his EU discourse in 2010 by saying that ‘we sceptics have a vital point’ about the need for EU reform. His point was: ‘We should look sceptically at grand plans and utopian visions’. Cameron’s diagnosis of the problem reiterated the well-known British suspicion that the European idea is theoretically motivated not practically grounded in the vicissitudes of international power: ‘For too long, the European Union has tried to make reality fits its institutions. But you can only succeed in the long run if the institutions fit the reality’ (Cameron 2010). Hague also reminded us that ‘Grand visions and ambitions are in vain if the EU cannot demonstrate effectiveness in its common policies in its immediate neighbourhood’ (Hague 2009). The EU, Cameron concluded, is not ‘an abstract end in itself’ but only exists to serve the member states, so it should be an organization ‘that understands and values national identity’ (Cameron 2010).

Comparing liberal Conservative discourses on the US and EU we can see that the balance is very much tilted towards interests and pragmatic choices. Even the heavily values-laden
narratives about the ‘special relationship’ cannot mask that this is a relationship which, at root, safeguards UK national interests in an uncertain world. Values are absent altogether from liberal Conservative constructions of the EU, replaced by an oppositional, confrontational tone. In that realm Britain stands up and fights for its interests in an organization which, unlike the US and UK, fundamentally misconstrues the nature of contemporary international ‘reality’ and how to channel power to safeguard material interests.

In 2010 Cameron introduced the elements of novelty he aspired to ingrain into the practice of British foreign policy. It is worth pointing out that these are not ‘new’ in a simple sense and indeed Cameron depicts them as a ‘change of course’ or, like a ship sailing in treacherous international waters, ‘adjusting the national tiller’ to promote British interests (Cameron 2010). However, they are heavily accented to be received as such for the purposes of media and public consumption and are worth highlighting because they show agency at work in the narrative formation of liberal Conservatism. The three areas are: commerce and foreign policy, strategic direction, and aid and security. Areas one and three are heavily overlapping but nonetheless are distinctive enough to warrant separate consideration.

When Robin Cook became New Labour Foreign Secretary in May 1997 he said he wanted to help make government work more ‘businesslike’ (Cook 1997). Cameron’s twist on this approach is to make British foreign more business-friendly via the enactment of a ‘commercial foreign policy’. As he explained: ‘This is not just about making Britain an attractive place to invest; it’s about selling Britain to the world too’ (Cameron 2010). Not for Cameron and Hague a fear of mixing ‘money and diplomacy’ (Cameron 2010) or acceptance that this ‘low grade mercantilism’ (Cameron 2011; Hague 2012). Their point is that ‘in the past’ this was what went wrong with British foreign policy: ‘We forgot old friends, missed new opportunities and damaged Britain’s interests as a result’ (Cameron 2011). Under the Coalition government Foreign Office diplomats have not just been ‘political ambassadors’ they have been ‘economic ambassadors too’ (Cameron 2012). In a ‘global race for jobs’ every new market needs exploiting and this feeds into what Cameron calls his push to create a ‘modern industrial strategy’ (Cameron 2012).

Liberal Conservatism’s second refinement to British foreign policy echoes Cook’s businesslike ethic in a different way – being ‘smarter’ about national security: ‘we also have to be more strategic and hard headed about how we go about advancing our national interests’, particularly in terms of matching commitments to resources in defence terms (Cameron 2010). The creation of the National Security Council, the 2010 National Security Strategy (HM Government 2010a) and the accompanying Strategic Defence and Security Review were all driven by the need to ‘ensure that ministers consider national security in the round and in a strategic way’ (Cabinet Office undated). Cameron’s third refinement extends Gordon Brown’s emphasis over the period 2007-2010 on the link between international aid, development and security (Vickers 2011). It was affirmed by the prime minister in his 2010 Lord Mayor’s Banquet speech that despite economic travails the government would hold fast on its ‘commitment to spend 0.7% of our GDP on aid by 2013. Why? Because it ‘literally saves lives. It helps prevent conflict’ (Cameron 2010). In 2012 Cameron said he remained
committed to its ‘promises to the poorest’ with a view to ‘eradicating absolute poverty in our world’ (Cameron 2012).

This last of the three refinements helps us appreciate that, although there is an element of altruism at work, values are generally subservient to interests in liberal Conservative British foreign policy in the sense that the pursuit of values helps the pursuit of UK economic and security interests. The idea that liberal values can be pursued for their own sake is very much out of vogue in the Conservative approach to international affairs. As Cameron expressed it in 2010: ‘And for millions of people our aid programme is the most visible example of Britain’s global reach. It is a powerful instrument of our foreign policy and profoundly in our national interest’ (Cameron 2010). The preponderance of Cameron’s discourse on values thus concerns the security benefits that can be garnered from them.

Undoubtedly, Cameron believes, the British have it within themselves to ‘do good’ around the world (Cameron 2010). However, that Pakistan ‘is set to become the biggest recipient of British aid’ is not charity for charity’s sake: ‘Terrorism feeds on broken countries, so our response must go far beyond tackling the leadership of terrorist groups’ (Cameron 2011). Aid in this construction is a security instrument alongside ‘hard’ military prowess. Cameron fully subscribes to ‘the moral argument for aid’ because ‘we have obligations to the poorest in the world’. Nonetheless, ‘I also believe it is in our national interest. Isn’t it better to help stop countries disintegrating – rather than end up dealing with the consequences for our own country: immigration, asylum terrorism?’ (Cameron 2011).

Two years earlier Hague had spelt out the economic case for aid out even more clearly: ‘We will be conscious that relatively small sums of money spent on conflict prevention can avert the need to spend vast sums on intervention or reconstruction aid, and is in alignment with our moral as well as national security duties’ (Hague 2009). In the liberal Conservative view, Britain – and the world – needs ‘to change the way we do development’ because targeted aid can ‘help avoid crises before they explode into violence, requiring immense military spending’ (Cameron 2011). Conveniently, ‘aid…can also contribute to a positive impression of Britain’ (Hague 2010).

Liberal Conservatism thus brings globalized security challenges into play to make the case for some spending now to save greater relative spending, and possible danger, in the future. In Libya, for example, Cameron argues that Britain acted altruistically, but that altruism helped promote national interests: ‘We saved civilian lives as [Muammar] Gaddafi’s tanks bore down on Benghazi…And now we have the prospect of a new partner in the Southern Mediterranean, stronger alliances with our friends in the Gulf, and a refreshed defence relationship with France. I would argue that our action helped keep the Arab Spring alive’. There is also the tangible, hard power benefit because: ‘in the last few days we have learnt that the new Libyan authorities have found chemical weapons that were kept hidden from the world’, despite Gaddafi’s earlier agreement to dismantle his weapons of mass destruction (Cameron 2011). In the liberal Conservative view, acting altruistically can bring rewards of their own, in hard and soft power terms and over the immediate and long-term.
Conclusion

Two conclusions flow from the preceding analysis: one is methodological, the other empirical. Methodologically, this paper has interpreted liberal Conservatism using discourse analysis of key speeches delivered by its main exponents, backed by evidence from official policy documents produced by the Conservative-led coalition government. The aim of using PPDA was to enhance the critical study of agency within a realm – foreign policy – where structures (material and ideational) have often been said to predominate, leaving little or no room for a nuanced account of the agents’ webs of beliefs that inform foreign policy practice. The questions that informed the research design in this paper attempted to collapse the ‘inside/outside’ distinction in the study of foreign policy by encouraging attention to the interplay between, on the one hand, the beliefs Cameron and Hague have come to hold about the world and, on the other, the traditions of exceptionalism and decline in post-1945 British foreign policy discourse.

It has been argued in the paper that liberal Conservatism accepts many core aspects of those traditions but has adapted them in line with dilemmas resulting from perceptions of the scale of the economic crisis facing Britain, especially as the global economy went into meltdown from 2008. The great power tradition remains influential because it forms the backdrop to the discourse on identity and Britain’s role in the world which has been remarkably stable since imperial times. The heightened soft power underpinning of that global role (seeking global ‘influence’ as opposed to global ‘power’) is what most distinguishes liberal Conservatism apart from previous foreign policy discourses. The declinist tradition has often been acknowledged but, ultimately, refuted by British governments. Liberal Conservatism is no different, except that it has been compelled to accept the material impact of the declinist tradition more publicly and more often. Liberal Conservative discourse also engages more openly with possible solutions to Britain’s economic travails and it has had to contend with resistances in the form of criticisms of an approach to foreign policy some see as ‘low grade mercantilism’ (for instance David Miliband, cited in Brogan 2011).

The main empirical conclusion is that Liberal Conservatism is highly pessimistic about the hard power assets available to Britain as well as the nature of contemporary international challenges confronting the nation. The pessimistic Realist or Conservative component of the discourse is thus very much to the fore and is in line with prior expectations about what we might expect to see in foreign policy speeches by Conservative Party leaders and opinion formers. The relentless focus is on securing interests in a dangerous world that will change only incrementally, not through utopian or idealist schemes: ‘in foreign policy idealism must always be tempered with realism’ (Hague 2009). On the other side of the equation there is the liberal emphasis on the power of values to mould the world for the good of others – and for the British. Optimism that Britain can use its great historic qualities to ‘hang in there’ against all the odds abounds in the speeches. Accompanying it is a discourse on values and their promotion which, it is said, can provide the normative basis for a reorientation of the international community around fundamentally ‘good’ actions to enhance the life of all nations and peoples, rich and poor.
Further research will be required to ascertain how liberal Conservatism survives the life of the coalition government in its entirety. Half way through its term, however, we are able to interpret this discourse as complex and multi-layered, founded on a delicate compromise between values and interests, optimism and pessimism and an enduring, historically-informed sense of Britishness. Taken in the round, liberal Conservatism draws on decades and centuries old traditions of thought about Britain’s global role and identity, but accepts that new ways have to be found to enact this role successfully in the modern world. The dilemma of economic decline has encouraged new thinking, new practice and may in time refashion the traditions of thought that have, rather uncritically, informed British foreign policy beliefs for so long.

References

*NB for formatting purposes, I have inserted ‘[-]’ into some web addresses below. These should be removed to access the link.


Waltz, K.N. (1959) *Man, the State and War* (New York: Cambridge University Press)