

The Article

The face of the future: the Commonwealth



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"The Commonwealth bears no resemblance to the empires of the past. It is an entirely new conception built on the highest qualities of the spirit of humankind: friendship, loyalty, and the desire for freedom and peace."

Queen Elizabeth II

While businesses everywhere are rethinking their strategies and relationships in the face of super-fast connections and advanced analytics, governments, diplomats and policy experts have been remarkably slow to apply the same lessons to international relations and institutions.

Very slow indeed has been the realisation amongst UK policymakers that tomorrow's global networks — many already with us today — perform entirely differently to many of the structures and behaviour patterns inherited from the 20th century.

And slowest of all has been appreciation of the vast potential of the modern and transformed Commonwealth network to shape itself round

all these new forces, and to prove itself to be, in the prescient words of the late Queen Elizabeth “the face of the future”. Her prescience went further when she spoke of the “entirely new conception” the modern Commonwealth was becoming. Entirely new also are the opportunities, benefits and dangers which the information age, and its consequent shifts in the pattern of global power, has opened up in the Commonwealth space.

What is more, the new unfolding tableau which is the Commonwealth network today fits precisely with the “entirely new” pattern of international relations in which the UK is working hard to find a place.

Yet clearly the work on this front is not going very well. The maintenance and invigoration of new networks demands not just occasional splurges of enthusiasm but a steady stream of policy creativity and detailed contact. While other countries, China included, have moved on from analysing and questioning the Commonwealth’s existence to exploiting the potential of its network, somehow the UK, which should have been the first to seize the new strategic opportunities, is left at the back of the queue, pondering the purpose of it all and how Britain should react to it.

This geopolitical torpor is what must now be overcome, as Britain feels its way towards a repositioning in a transformed international landscape. The time has obviously come to bring Commonwealth relations back to the centre of British strategy and planning.

Yet there is a strong sense that this is simply not happening. Two important documents in the last two years have sought to re-state the UK’s international policies in a contested, volatile and very fast-changing world. The first, the so-called Integrated Review of 2021, was a brave attempt to bring together UK policies and aims across a wide field of defence, national security, development, trade and diplomacy. The second, in April 2023, was an equally brave attempt to update, or “refresh”, the first one.

One obvious reason for this “refresh” was that by ill chance the first Review appeared prior to the Russian assault on Ukraine. But, as the second publication conceded, everything in the environment seemed to happen more quickly than anticipated, both in the European theatre and in the

wider world of the Indo-Pacific, and Asia generally, calling for “a renewed purpose and cooperation among the UK’s core network of allies and partners”.

Both publications emphasised the need for new engagement by a post-Brexit UK in Asian and developing world affairs, the second one more than the first, which had perhaps clung too doggedly to the Euro-Atlantic region as “the region of primary and overriding importance to UK interests”. In speaking of new and wider domains with which to ally, in alluding to such matters as global energy issues, to the ever-increasing importance of soft power (despite the horrifically hard aspects of the Ukraine conflict), to cybercrime, space dangers and rising Chinese aggression, the refresh version demonstrated the clear need, evident to some for years past, to catch up with the new nature of international relations and priorities, and to help put the autocracies on the defensive.

But anyone who assumed that this line of analysis and thinking would lead straight on to the UK’s membership of the Commonwealth network will have been disappointed. The subject barely gets a mention in either document. This seems all the more extraordinary when one considers that Commonwealth membership is growing, with more potential members queuing up, and the geopolitical importance of the entire system of like-minded nations, the biggest and most extensive by far on the planet.

A few distinguished columnists have begun to emphasize in their writings the high relevance, indeed front-line role, of the Commonwealth “club” in facing both Chinese and Russian penetration of the entire developing world. They point out that what should surely be a chain of defence and containment against the authoritarian challenge — an alliance of the like-minded, independent but liberally-inclined — is in danger of becoming its reverse: a front-line spearhead, pointing the other way, of advancing Chinese hegemony.

The problem may lie less with Cabinet Office and Foreign Office officialdom than with the British media generally. The British media, both broadcast and printed, have long been wedded to a very different Commonwealth story, aided and abetted by a persistent group of Commonwealth denigrators with their eyes firmly fixed on the rear view mirror and a long superseded imperial past.

If the Review authors took any lead from this direction then they were unwise. Media unreliability has been made worse by complete confusion about the 13 remaining realms under the direct sovereignty of the British monarch, with comment routinely reporting the wish for realms to become republics as signifying a break-up of the Commonwealth, when in fact it is the complete opposite.

The consequent blindness to the transformed nature of today's Commonwealth network, and its significance for both UK security and prosperity exacts a heavy price, not just internationally but on the domestic front as well .

Many people today feel acutely this lack of purpose and narrative in Britain's world direction. Without a focus for national loyalties there is social fragmentation. Indeed , there is a risk of fragmentation of the UK itself. Yet in today's changed world context, with Asia and Africa rising very fast, the Commonwealth connection is a story which can engender greater socio-political stability at home *and* vastly greater engagement and influence in the affairs of rising Asia and Africa, to which the Commonwealth is a very obvious gateway.

So there *is* a new story both to be told, which it at present is not being told, and a new agenda of action to be pursued, which is not being pursued. The Commonwealth story should not be kept in a separate box, but seen as a central component of British foreign policy, as we find our way forward in the hazardous conditions of a transformed and unfamiliar 21st century.

Like a huge iceberg, the bulk of intra-Commonwealth activity and networking today lies beneath the radar of conventional diplomacy. Experts and diplomats, accustomed to look only at what goes on between governments, miss completely the new reality. The world is moving outside the familiar interstate system; power and influence now flow between networks, professions, businesses and political causes regardless of national boundaries on an unprecedented scale.

Of course the modern Commonwealth needs enlightened and sophisticated governance to guide it through today's shoals. Governance of the Commonwealth structure has to search for, and practice, that most

elusive of formulae in modern digitised societies: simultaneous leadership and followership, agenda-shaping without agenda-forcing. This implies changes at Marlborough House and transformation of the Governing Board into a far more creative and connected body — the kind of constant Commonwealth which communications technology now makes easily possible.

But the crucial momentum needed to implement these radical ideas has not been there. Nor was it forthcoming from the chairmanship of the Commonwealth, which rested in British hands for the two years, and more, following the April 2018 Heads of Government Meeting in London, and which showed no interest in such changes.

Looking at the scene from the selfish British viewpoint, it is clear that the modern Commonwealth provides Britain both with the ideal transmission mechanism for its considerable soft power influence, and with an excellent opportunity to make the contribution to world peace and prosperity to which the better side of the British character has always aspired.

Wind back two or three decades and few expected the morning would ever come when Britain would need access to the swelling markets, and swelling capital resources, let alone direct security support, of key Commonwealth friends, notably the giant and dynamic India. That morning has now arrived.

Why has this major failure in the British official perception to understand this occurred? Why is the obvious opportunity for British exceptionalism in a highly competitive world order not being lauded and promoted ten times more energetically? Why does the Integrated Review Refresh document not note, or analyse the evident growing attractions of the modern Commonwealth “club” ?

The task now should be a supportive one. It should be aimed not just at a still-to-be-convinced Whitehall but at all the generators of British soft power and influence, drawing trends and developments together and setting out an interrelated whole. It is a question of ditching some of the old and most familiar principles of diplomacy and preparing to operate with the tools of a completely different environment.

History of course plays a part as the Commonwealth evolves, but the overwhelming power of connectivity now plays a much bigger one.

The problem for officialdom in keeping up is that the Commonwealth is not a clearly defined zone. The orderly diplomatic mind despairs of the generalisations and looks for the action points, the pinch-points and the common interest points.

Rather, the Commonwealth represents a kind of silver thread winding through almost every public issue, domestic and international, not a subject to be tucked neatly away in a filing cabinet for lack of immediate and obvious relevance .

On the home front, issues ranging from social mobility, community stability and immigration, to education and skills, of course to sport and to the cohesion of the UK itself, all have a growing Commonwealth dimension.

This list now has to be elevated to national strategy and direction, to trade expansion, to international partnership and development, to influence and soft power deployment, to all kinds of technical cooperation; above all (because all else depends upon it) to security and military cooperation against new threats and new intrusions.

The problem of comprehension by busy officials and headline-chasing media is categorisation. The Commonwealth is not treaty-based – membership is entirely voluntary. It is not a trade bloc, nor a defensive alliance, not even neatly slotted into the now outdated concepts of “East” and “West” that dominated twentieth century thinking on foreign policy, and still persist in certain quarters on both sides of the Atlantic.

The cohesive answer of the last century was that members were like-minded, used the English language for most purposes, subscribed to the principles of various declarations down the years (Harare, Edinburgh, etc.) and liked to maintain full access to the commercial vitality of the Anglophone world.

These common threads still apply, but they have now been very strongly reinforced. The two most recently admitted members, Togo and Gabon, have both repeatedly stated the wish to deepen commercial and

diplomatic exposure to the Anglophone world of success. Compared with other networks, such as the Francophonie of which these two have been members, they see the Commonwealth system as offering altogether better prospects. The same arguments can be heard from other countries queuing up or seriously discussing moves in the Commonwealth direction.

But in the twenty-first century there is both a more powerful binding agent at work than any of these, namely the electronic communications revolution, and a far more urgent motive for sticking together. Total global, instant and virtually costless contact has given a disparate and apparently fading association a blood transfusion. These are nations, many of them still young, which sense a new power in their hands with which to safeguard their hard-won independence with pride and a greatly enhanced sense of national identity. They are not thrilled about the prospect of being pulled into either the Chinese or American sphere of influence. Both leave them uncomfortable.

The outgoing Director of Chatham House, Robin Niblett, brilliantly identified in his valedictory address last year the growing number of what he labelled “neo-non-aligned nations” in the new global dispensation.

This much larger gathering of “non-aligned” are of course very different from the “non-aligned” minority that emerged at the Bandung Conference of 1955, who in the midst of the Cold War tried to be ideologically neutral. In the present age, by far the largest grouping of nations are those happy to take what is on offer from the super-powers and hegemons, but absolutely determined to preserve their independence — and far better equipped than in the past to assert and defend it.

For them the Commonwealth could become a safe harbour in a threatening world environment – somewhere where there are links to be worked at, friends to be found and reassuring and rewarding relationships to be sustained. The Commonwealth could begin to be seen as a thoroughly smart club of which to be a member – not to solve every problem but at least to share it sympathetically.

New technology takes these relationships deeper, and beyond the scope of governments. Every interest group, every institution at every level of education, every professional discipline, every political cause from across

the Commonwealth can now come together in the same on-line arena. These are people and groupings who have probably never met before. They represent interests and like-minded sections of society ready to engage, with their own agendas, often lying outside the reach of governmental officialdom altogether.

In all this the UK has a role to play, but it is one that needs to change. For the UK to be effective, it must leave no doubt in the minds of the other members that it, too, shares their independence aspirations. In particular the UK must reassure them that, while it remains a good and- strong partner of the USA, it is not just a Washington puppet.

In other words — and this is a key part of the new story that UK officialdom and the Integrated Review authors, former and refreshed, have found it hardest to grasp, – *a forward and constructive role in the world-wide Commonwealth network also demands a clear “refreshment” of the old “special relationship” with the United States.*

Perhaps the new stance should even go further and demonstrate that it has escaped the “West-versus-the-Rest” mentality which so dominated 20th century geopolitics. This is the Manichean past which many Americans are reluctant to let go, but is now being replaced by much deeper shifts, at a philosophical level in understanding how societies work and develop and relate to each other in the digital age.

This is why it is now imperative for savvy officials in every department of the British Government to widen their vistas and see where departmental objectives can be supplemented or even led by non-governmental creativity and inspiration. This is something which can be done far more swiftly, efficiently and regularly in the digital high connectivity age. Diplomacy itself is being outsourced, with a cats’ cradle of second channel contacts developing alongside even the most fraught international relationships.

This could be a fruitful future. But note the word “could”. For it to take shape, the British member of the network has to play a much more vigorous part than has been evident to date.

This is where the new mindset is called for and where the UK has to be policy-active in a number of key areas.

There has been plenty of time to prepare. Parliament, rather than Government, has definitely been ahead of the game. The March 1996 Report of the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (“The Future Role of the Commonwealth”) was a vivid opener of minds – though too few – to the nature of the new Commonwealth.

These should have long ago been looked at not just vaguely as “family”, but as key and practical allies in new world conditions. It is no accident that half the membership of the CPTPP giant trade network in the Pacific, which Britain is rightly keen to join, are Commonwealth members.

The problem has been getting Whitehall and Westminster to notice. Too many of our best minds have been wrapped up in the EU saga. That the whole Commonwealth network has changed radically in character and significance has hardly, until very recently, registered.

We are now, two or three decades into the digital revolution, in a completely different place. This time there is a whole new dimension to address, and it lies deep in the security priorities of almost every Commonwealth member state. It is this new concern which turns the Commonwealth’s global role on its head.

It is therefore the right time for Britain, as a member of this growing network, to start thinking towards a resurrection, not just of trade agreements but of security arrangements which have to go with them, drawing us closer to the modern and vastly changed network that is the Commonwealth.

A widely-held view in London policy circles has long been that the Commonwealth was not only a marginal aspect of British overseas interests, probably destined to shrink further under the new monarch, but that the numerous island states were anyway too remote to have any strategic value. They were at best unimportant, at worst an occasional humanitarian challenge, but in no sense an asset.

This is not at all the way China sees things. Nor does Russia. Through Chinese eyes the island states, whether of the Pacific or the Caribbean, have very clear strategic value – through their proximity to key maritime trade routes, their opportunities as bases for drone activity and for rival GPS developments to Western systems.

Hence an emerging pattern of Chinese engagement in, for example, the Solomon Isles, in Vanuatu, in Tuvalu, in Fiji, or, over in the Caribbean in Barbados, Jamaica, Antigua, Trinidad. Hence, not only the infrastructure loans, the budget support, the technical assistance, but also the outright involvement in weaponry, in military support through training places, policing methods and other accoutrements of governance.

The African continent, home of 21 Commonwealth member states, now lives with thousands of Chinese military personnel. To a lesser extent, Russia, through entities such as the sinister Wagner Group, also makes its global presence known.

This creeping planet-wide Chinese encroachment has passed across the agenda both of the Biden administration and of the assembled G7. From the seven countries' deliberations in June 2022 —with four more in attendance by invitation (India, South Korea, South Africa, Singapore) — came the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment plan.

This was a relaunch of President Biden's "Build Back Better World" 2017 idea, a response to earlier apprehensions about China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which had failed to take off.

If the powers attending had asked why, they might have seen another way forward. The clear alternative is to underpin trade, investment and governance strengthening proposals with a degree of existing organizational and diplomatic coherence — in short, with bodies almost exactly like the Commonwealth.

Most Commonwealth countries, given even a hint of balanced and wise policy encouragement from the UK, would have taken a more sober and realistic view of the problem. There was no reason to suppose that most members of the Commonwealth network would have aligned themselves either with ideological Sinophobia, on the one hand, or with the seductions of China's BRI on the other. The fate of countries that fall for Chinese blandishments had been made clear, recently and vividly, by Sri Lanka's unhappy situation, as well as by the almost insoluble indebtedness of numerous smaller island and coastal states to the Chinese, or the situation of Pakistan.

But none of this happened because none of it was offered. Had the G7 members been more careful readers of Sun Tzu, the Chinese general and philosopher — who showed so clearly that the cleverest way to defeat the enemy was to do so without fighting — things on this front might have gone quite differently.

It is late in the day, but a thoroughgoing change of direction in London, could yet help turn the situation in a better direction – better not only for world stability and democracy, but also for the UK , as it carves out its new role.

This article is based on a paper given at the new Centre for Commonwealth Affairs. The author is a former Conservative Cabinet minister and chairman of the Lords International Relations Committee.
