

## India's Commonwealth

Whether or not the Commonwealth Summit this week in London makes major moves towards renewal and reform, the Indian debate on the future of the forum has certainly changed. After decades of ignoring it, Delhi now believes that a rejuvenated Commonwealth could lend greater depth to India's global outreach. When [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) decided to join the Commonwealth after Independence, voices on the left, right and centre expressed deep discomfort with what they saw as a needless affiliation with the former colonial power. Nehru, however, stood steadfast in his commitment to the Commonwealth. For him, it was a valuable political and economic link to a major Western power during the Cold War.

While both Indira and Rajiv saw some utility in India's membership of the Commonwealth, the fact remains that India's growing divergence with Britain and the West during the Cold War and an inward economic orientation severely limited Delhi's possibilities with the forum. In any case, as Britain itself turned to Europe, the Commonwealth began to lose much of its lustre in London. When India opened up to the world, politically and economically, after the Cold War, Delhi could have made something out of the Commonwealth. But with its focus on the US and China on the one hand and South Asia on the other, the Commonwealth simply fell off India's mental map.

Delhi's renewed interest in the Commonwealth has been long overdue. It is based on common sense. At a moment when its global interests are expanding, the pragmatists in Delhi argue, India must make the best use of all available multilateral forums, including the Commonwealth. Pointing to India's current temptation to join any forum that has its doors open, realists point out the bird in hand is worth two in the bush. In moving towards greater engagement with the Commonwealth, Delhi must, however, steer clear of four pitfalls.

The first is the fallacy of a reformed Commonwealth as "Empire 2.0". Many British intellectuals are deriding London's new enthusiasm for the Commonwealth as mere nostalgia for the colonial era. They warn against the illusion that the Commonwealth can be a substitute for the European Union. There is no reason for India to be drawn into that internal argument in Britain. What Delhi does know is that Britain is repositioning itself in the world after Brexit.

What matters for India is not London's motivation, but the terms of engagement that are on offer for a new British relationship with India and the Commonwealth in the changed domestic and international context. Negotiating favourable terms is far more important for Delhi than proclaiming that the Commonwealth is a colonial relic. The debate on the Commonwealth can't be about its past. It must be about its future, especially the value of the 53-nation forum for India's international relations.

In the present, India is poised to overtake Britain's aggregate GDP in the next year or two. The International Monetary Fund puts Britain's GDP in 2017 at \$2.56 trillion and India's at \$2.43 trillion. It's about time India got over the defensive mindset in relation to a former colonial power. Here, the contrast between India and China is sharp. Beijing is not arguing with London about the opium wars or Britain's leading role in China's "hundred year humiliation". Instead, they are trying to seduce Britain, especially the city of London, into China's commercial and financial orbit.

The second pitfall is the pretence that reform and renewal of the Commonwealth are only about tinkering with the status quo. With London barely acquiescing in its existence, the Commonwealth has settled on roles that are of little strategic consequence today. One role is that of a tutor of moral science. After the end of the Cold War, the Commonwealth jumped on the bandwagon of good governance and humanitarianism.

But the heyday of the attempts at external engineering of internal social and political order in the developing world is now well past us. The Commonwealth can offer advice and assistance when asked. It should avoid pushing democracy and human rights down the throats of other states. Thanks to a newly rich China, the regimes in many developing states have alternatives that did not exist earlier.

What the Commonwealth needs today is not a “prescriptive approach” on rights, but a focus on bringing greater economic prosperity for the peoples of the forum through an enhanced trade and investment relationship. The Commonwealth could devote considerable energies towards the promotion of sustainable development and maritime security, which pose existential challenges to the many small and island states in the forum. The Commonwealth can become more valuable to its member states if it directs its aid and assistance to a few major priority areas rather than spreading its resources on a range of issues.

The third pitfall is the allure of leadership. India can and must do a lot of things in re-energising the Commonwealth, but claiming leadership should be the last thing. Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s emphasis, instead, must be on strengthening India's contribution to the Commonwealth. As the soon-to-be largest economy in the forum, India can significantly increase its levels of economic assistance, give more to the maintenance of the Secretariat, boost the current efforts on capacity building, and above all, open its economy to facilitate trade liberalisation across the Commonwealth.

Fourth, reviving the Commonwealth is not about India taking over from Britain. It is about reordering the relationship between Delhi and London. Although the relations between India and Britain have significantly improved, Britain is yet to do what most other Western powers have done. It is to recognise that India's rise is in their own national interests. Britain has remained somewhat hesitant to align with India on the regional issues in the Subcontinent and beyond. A significant change in that direction could help transform the bilateral relationship as well as the Commonwealth.

*(The writer is director, Carnegie India, Delhi and contributing editor on foreign affairs for 'The Indian Express')*

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