

## Parliamentary panel to probe U.K.-India relations

Thomas Tugendhat, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Wikimedia

A British parliamentary committee is looking into relations between Britain and India — including the impact of Britain’s visa regime — as part of a wider examination of the future of “Global Britain”.

The inquiry comes at a time when tensions between the two countries have heightened amid Indian concerns about the U.K.’s reluctance to ease visa norms for students and professionals.

The committee will look at the issue of bilateral trade as well as the impact of Britain’s visa policy, and cooperation on regional security, counterterrorism, technology, innovation and multilateral institutions.

### ‘Global Britain’ strategy

“How we work with India will be key to our place in the world in coming decades,” said Tom Tugendhat, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

The committee said the relationship is as an important “test case” for the government’s “Global Britain” strategy, and pointed to a number of questions. These include: how strong is the bilateral relationship; how should Britain balance political, strategic and trade issues in determining its relationship; and, does the U.K.’s visa regime facilitate the type of relationship the government seeks with India?

Parliamentarians in both houses have sought to scrutinise the changing world in which Britain is seeking to strengthen relations outside the EU. In May, the House of Lords committee on International Relations held an evidence session on relations with India, as part of an inquiry into U.K. foreign policy in changed world conditions.

Earlier this month, Britain’s former High Commissioner to India, Sir Richard Stagg, told a meeting of the Indo-British All Party Parliamentary Group that a “lack of trust” permeated bilateral relations, warning that Britain did not have a strategy. He also said that London’s approach was based on “random” and “inevitably ineffective” interventions by members of the government.

Alongside the visa issues, he pointed to Indian concerns around Britain’s Pakistan policy. He said there were also concerns that Britain was not doing enough to facilitate the return of those India sought to extradite, including high net worth individuals.

Earlier this year, in a dig at British authorities, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj had said that Mr. Modi had told Prime Minister Theresa May, on the sidelines of the Commonwealth summit, that British courts shouldn’t lecture India on prison conditions.

### Issue of overstayers

India also pulled out of signing an agreement on the return of illegal migrants because of the 15-day period that would have been stipulated in the agreement for documents to be verified, which India viewed as unrealistic. Britain’s Trade Secretary Liam Fox then linked the decision not to include Indian students in a relaxation of visa requirements to the non-signing of the agreement and the issue of Indians overstaying their visa.

While India acknowledged that there are overstayers, it contested the scale of the problem. “I am sure there are many [overstayers] but where did this figure of 1,00,000 come from?” asked High Commissioner Y.K. Sinha in June.

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