

India and Britain: Getting beyond the Post-colonial

C Raja Mohan

Summary

If political prickliness has long characterised India's attitudes to the United Kingdom, London struggled to shed its colonial paternalism towards India. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's twice deferred visit to India in April 2022 marks a decisive shift in the mindsets of Delhi and London that is facilitating a more productive engagement for mutual benefit.

Although the English-speaking elites of independent India had quite a cosy relationship with their British counterparts, that warmth never translated into improved political relations between Delhi and London. In April 2022, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's visit to New Delhi demonstrated a new level of political comfort between the two leaderships and a shared commitment to build an enduring strategic partnership.

The inflexion point in bilateral relations that is coming amidst India's 75th celebration of independence from Britain suggests that Delhi and London have finally begun to transcend the prickly post-colonial phase in their bilateral relations. The virtual summit between Johnson and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2021 unveiled an [ambitious road map](#) to transform the bilateral relationship across a broad range of domains, including trade, technology and defence cooperation. India's Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar and British Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss took charge of reviewing progress and sustaining the pressure on the bureaucracy to implement the roadmap. Johnson's talks with Modi gave a big push to this process.

Most observers who were expecting a clash over Ukraine during Johnson's visit were surprised by the display of the bonhomie between the two leaders. The warmth between the two leaders is entirely in tune with the expanding scope of bilateral ties. Modi noted the special [personal contribution of Johnson](#) to the modernisation of bilateral relations. Johnson, in turn, called the Modi a *khas dost* (dear friend).

While the Ukraine crisis did figure in the bilateral talks, Johnson was largely following a pattern set by American President [Joe Biden's recent discussions with Modi](#). The strategy is to avoid public criticism of the Indian position on Ukraine, express understanding of Delhi's long-standing ties to Moscow and offer significant support for India to reduce its reliance on Russia. As Modi and Johnson exchanged views, Indian officials declared there was no pressure from Britain on India. Johnson did not refer to Ukraine in his joint press conference with Modi. While Modi did not criticise Russia on Ukraine, he reiterated India's call for an immediate ceasefire and underlined India's emphasis on the respect for the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty of nations.

When the British press urged Johnson to comment on Ukraine, he responded that [Modi had spoken up](#) against the Russian invasion in talks with Putin. Johnson's defence of Modi

signals that the West is coming to terms with India's ambivalence on Ukraine and dealing with the source of the problem – India's dependence on Russian weapons.

The two leaders had a lot more on their plate than just Ukraine. At the top of the agenda is the effort to conclude an agreement on [Enhanced Trade Partnership](#). Johnson wants to seal the deal by Diwali this year; Modi promised that India will reciprocate with speed and urgency like it did in concluding the recent free trade agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Australia.

Complementing the political push for a historic trade liberalisation agreement is the decision by the two leaders to [deepen bilateral defence and security cooperation](#). While India welcomed Britain's Indo-Pacific tilt, Britain announced the decision to ease the transfer of defence equipment and technology for India. The two sides are also determined to begin joint research, development and production of advanced weapons and related technologies. Modi and Johnson also issued a statement on strengthening their [partnership in the cyber domain](#) to deliver results on governance, deterrence, resilience and capacity building. Beyond defence, security and advanced technologies, the two leaders also announced plans to boost cooperation on mitigating climate change and promoting clean energy.

Tying these together is the determination to strengthen the ['living bridge'](#) between the two nations – an idea articulated by Modi during his visit to London in 2015. The 'living bridge' is not just about the large Indian diaspora in Britain (nearly 1.5 million) but also the immense possibilities for collaboration between various sectors of the two civil societies. These possibilities never disappeared in the immediate decades after India's independence from Britain 75 years ago, but they could not be harnessed because of political differences. However, in the unfolding era of strategic convergence, the massive bridge between India and Britain is coming alive.

In the last few years, there has been a major political effort by the Conservative government led by Johnson and the Bharatiya Janata Party government headed by Modi to overcome irritants in bilateral ties. This was in sharp contrast to the Labour Party that had turned increasingly critical of India's Kashmir policy and the state of human rights in the country. If the Labour Party was increasingly focused on India's internal issues, the Tories would now be seeing India through the prism of business and geopolitics. The traditional affection for Labour in India's political class has begun to shift towards the conservatives in the Modi years. The self-assurance of the Modi government's foreign policy was reflected in its ability to overcome the post-colonial resentments towards London, win new constituencies of support domestically, and pursue India's long-term interests with greater realism. In the post-colonial phase, Delhi and London could not translate converging interests into concrete outcomes. In the new phase, both sides are now ready to prioritise their nation's interests above the old arguments.

.....

Professor C Raja Mohan is a Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and a Senior Fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute in New Delhi, India. He can be contacted at crmohan@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.