

India and the Commonwealth: Re-imagining the Imperial Connection

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Summary

After a prolonged neglect of the Commonwealth, India is ready to devote greater attention to a multilateral organisation long dismissed as a relic of the British empire. India may now be betting that the 54-member Commonwealth could help contribute to the pursuit of India's regional and global interests. The prospects for translating that ambition into concrete outcomes will be tested at the 26th Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kigali, Rwanda, in June 2022.

Whether or not the Commonwealth Summit taking place on 24 and 25 June 2022 in Kigali, Rwanda, marks an inflection point in the organisation's history, the Indian debate over the forum's future has certainly changed. After decades of ignoring it, Delhi now believes that a rejuvenated Commonwealth could lend greater depth to India's global outreach. After skipping several Commonwealth meetings in recent years, India decided to attend the 25th Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in London in 2018.

While Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit was widely heralded as an important policy shift, it did not lead to concrete outcomes either at the summit or afterwards. Although Modi is not attending the 26th CHOGM, India appears eager to shape the outcomes. In the [joint statement](#) issued after talks between Modi and the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson in Delhi in late April 2022, the two leaders said they, "...looked forward to working closely together for a successful Commonwealth Summit in Kigali later this year". They also "agreed on the need to re-energise the Commonwealth, revitalising its agenda and institutions to support the needs and expectations of all its Member States, in particular to promote inclusive and sustainable development."

Both Johnson and Modi have their own reasons to reimagine the Commonwealth's potential. Johnson is seeking to restructure London's foreign and economic policies after Brexit and is eager to develop non-European markets and partnerships. Although the Commonwealth is not an economic or political substitute for Europe, there is much that Britain could do in revitalising its colonial connections.

India, however, is going through a far more complex transition in re-engaging the Commonwealth. 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.

Both Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi saw some utility in India's membership in the Commonwealth – they actively mobilised the Commonwealth to counter the apartheid policies in South Africa that Britain and the West were unwilling to oppose. However, India's growing divergence with Britain and the West during the Cold War and its 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 United States (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 is based on common sense. As India's global interests expand, the realists in Delhi argue that 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, pragmatists point out that the bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Meanwhile, [China is making inroads](#) among the members of the Commonwealth while many in India's political class dismiss it as an unwanted reminder of India's colonial bondage.

As Delhi struggles to discard the colonial prism that shapes its attitude to the Commonwealth, it must also steer clear of internal arguments in Britain dismissing the attempt to revitalise the Commonwealth as an imperial nostalgia among the Tories. India's focus should be on the future possibilities of the Commonwealth than its imperial past. 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.

India is poised to overtake Britain's aggregate gross domestic product (GDP) in the next year or two – in 2021, India's GDP at about \$2.9 trillion (S\$4 trillion) is barely behind Britain's \$3.1 trillion (S\$4.3 trillion). The Modi government is certainly breaking free from the defensive mindset in dealing with Britain that envelops much of the Indian establishment, including the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party itself. Meanwhile, the prickly relationship between Delhi and London has been slowly but certainly evolving into a [strategic partnership](#) in recent years.

Meanwhile, independent of the United Kingdom, India's ties with the other countries of the Anglosphere – like Australia and the US – have seen significant transformation. Even as it draws close to the West, India retains its independent foreign policy and continues to be a voice of the global South. If India's claim to be a ["South Western power"](#) hold, Delhi could act as a valuable political bridge between the Commonwealth's colonial past and its productive multilateral future.

The immediate challenge for India and Britain is to lend a strategic purpose to the Commonwealth which seems to have lost its way in the world. That will not be easy amidst the rise in other political identities of the member states and engagement with multiple other regional and international organisations. Yet, there is no denying that the Commonwealth has survived – largely intact – for more than seven decades, since its

inception in 1949. It has also [attracted members](#) that are not part of the British empire. Rwanda is one of them. The Commonwealth's future, then, is what India and Britain decide to do with it

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