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The third in our series of expert comment and analysis, by the Rt Hon the Lord Howell of Guildford, Minister of State at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (2010-2012), Chairman of the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee (2016-2019) and GSF Advisory Board member. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.

When the Fog Lifts: A Changed Landscape Revealed

After Brexit and after the COVID-19 crisis, as the fog of uncertainty clears and the dust settles, there on the new international landscape, as viewed from the island of Great Britain, we shall see two markedly new and different features.

One of these will be labelled 'Japan' and the other will be marked 'Commonwealth network'.

Why these two? Take Japan first. This will feature because as the UK develops a new pattern of alliances and bilateral links it will look to its natural friends in Asia (by far the fastest growing and most successful post-Covid region) to build a new international position. To those who say 'well, why not China?', the answer is that we are heading for an age of cooperation between middle powers, not superpowers.

The two giant economies, China and the USA, are going to be so preoccupied rivalling each other that they will fit uneasily into the fascinating global network pattern of nations now emerging. Neither giant will make comfortable companions, although both will have to be carefully and gingerly handled. Their constant bickering and squabbling belong to a past era of international conduct – more deserving of the epithet *children* power than *super*power behaviour.

It is the medium-sized economies and societies of the world which are going to find themselves naturally

pulled together by the ever-busy networking processes which carry on connecting night and day at every level, governmental and (even more) non-governmental, commercial, and through every thread of civil society.

Britain will need urgently to gain a stronger foothold in Asia – where the greatest market growth and innovation (both technical and social) are going to occur over the coming decades, and Japan makes the obvious link point. This is a nation which despite the dark days of the past has grown in recent decades into having an exceptional warmth towards the UK, and was slightly puzzled, and a little hurt, by the over-the-top wooing of China that went on during the Cameron era.

It stands very ready to welcome us into the great new Asian trading networks that are going to dominate world markets, besides having a formidable defence force which is quietly linking up with our own.

Unfortunately the penny has not quite dropped in the higher reaches of British diplomacy, although it soon will. Too many foreign policy experts in London are still musing over the old 'special relationship' with the USA, without understanding that in the network age an entirely new kind of relationship has to be forged – still friendly but very different from the old trans-Atlantic dependency and protection with which former British governments have been used to living. Trump himself is merely a reflection of this changed world, which has been brought about over the last three or four decades by the far more impelling and enduring powers of technology and the altered web of world power and influence.



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As for the other new feature with which British diplomatic expertise has got to come to terms, the Commonwealth network of fifty four nations, this is part of the same transformed pattern tugging our interests in new directions. Deep and instinctive understanding in Britain of the enormous Commonwealth potential has of course always been there all along, but for the past forty years it has been submerged by the fashionable view of the European Union as Britain's immediate, next-door, salvation.

Continental Europe remains a wonderfully diverse and dynamic neighbourhood, with which Britain now has to build a new variety of links both bilateral and multilateral, in line with the potential of modern connectivity. But its very character precludes the kind of standardised bloc-building about which the founders of European unity dreamed back in the 20th century. A new, much cleverer and more flexible pattern throughout Europe must now be created, as many of the more far-seeing European leaders and commentators are now arguing as well. Looking beyond Brexit on the assumption of an unchanged EU leads straight into a brick wall.

For a seagoing and trading nation like Britain it is in the great new markets of Asia, east and central, Africa north and south, and most of Latin America, where business must be done and new links established.

By luck rather than good judgement the British have inherited this vast and exceptional new global network of common affinities to which the digital age has given a kind of blood transfusion.

At the moment, it is indeed hard to peer ahead beyond the virus crisis, and the bewildering statistics and opinions which swirl round it, into this changed world of opportunities. But if there is any doubt in British minds about the Japanese linkage then a quiet exercise visit a few weeks back to one of London's great parks, Battersea, might help - one such visit per day, along with a trip to the shops for food or to the pharmacy, being fully permitted by current lockdown regulations.

This year the avenues of blossoms, now fading, have been breath-taking and quite exceptional. Thousands more cherry trees from Japan are being planted in parks and public places round Britain. Perhaps the trees, being a little taller, at least when fully grown, than humans, can see a little further ahead than people through the present clouds.

If so, they will be revealing a changed landscape ahead, both at home and across the world. And it is a landscape which is going to offer some most interesting and fruitful alliances.

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House of Lords Official Portrait

(This comment is based on an article published in the Japan Times on 17th April 2020)



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