Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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The Commonwealth may appear irrelevant but it would be a pity to lose it

The Commonwealth, whose heads of government are gathered for a biennial summit this week, has been called a truly eclectic global family.

Encompassing a third of the world's population across six continents, its membership ranges from India, with its 1.4 billion people, to the likes of Samoa, host of this week's meeting, with just 218,000.

Like all big families, of course, its members do not always see eye to eye.

The UK government has already pushed back on addressing the issue of slavery reparations, sought by Caribbean and African members, by pointing out it is not on this year's agenda.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer, attending his first Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), can meanwhile expect to be challenged about declining levels of UK aid to its less developed Commonwealth partners.

Small developing island states such as Samoa, which make up more than a third of the Commonwealth's 56 members, will also be pressing for more urgency on the threat they face from climate change. It is a challenge on which they feel their views are often overlooked in other international forums.

Part of the soft power armoury

The theme of this week's summit is resilience, ranging from support for resilient democratic institutions that uphold human rights, democracy, and the rule of law to the creation of resilient economies that support recovery and prosperity.

Noble aims, no doubt. But what role can an arguably anachronistic organisation, born out of the dissolution of the British Empire, hope to play in a world of shifting power blocs?

The concept of a Commonwealth of independent nations dates back to the late 19th century and the independence of Canada, which continued to maintain a constitutional link to Britain.

The modern Commonwealth was born in 1949 when newly-independent India remained a member despite its decision to become a republic detached from the British Crown.

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British politicians continue to see Commonwealth membership as part of its soft power armoury, although it long ceased being a purely British-oriented institution.

Imperial nostalgics within the Brexit movement argued that the destiny of "Global Britain" lay more with its Commonwealth partners than with its neighbours in the European Union.

However, progress on bilateral trade deals with Commonwealth partners has so far failed to live up to the Brexiters' promises. British farmers complained that agreements with Australia and New Zealand opened the door to cheap imports with which they could not compete.

Trade talks with Canada have stalled, while the previous Conservative government's hope for a speedy free trade agreement with India remained unfulfilled when it left office, with the next round of negotiations not due until next month at the earliest.

Clearly, Britain's founding role in the Commonwealth does not mean that tough-minded negotiators from partner nations are therefore prepared to cut the UK any slack.

The Commonwealth's chief virtue

For some of the larger and more influential members, other partnerships rival their commitment to the Commonwealth without necessarily being mutually exclusive.

India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, is this week in Russia for a summit of the expanded BRICS alongside President Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping. The BRICS, originally formed by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, is seen by the Russian and Chinese leaders as balancing the West's dominance.

For India, the BRICS is a forum in which it can promote a global leadership role while establishing its strategic autonomy in a multipolar world, all the while maintaining ties with the US.

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It should come as no surprise then that Modi, along with South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa, has decided to prioritise attendance at the Russian summit over the one in Samoa.

Perhaps the Commonwealth's chief virtue is that, unlike existing and emerging, and potentially conflicting power blocs, it links big developed countries to small and sometimes vulnerable ones as equal partners.

They are committed, at least in theory, to upholding democratic processes, human rights and the rule of law.

Too British?

A Commonwealth observer mission in Mozambique this month urged restraint in the wake of disputed elections there and condemned the killing of a prominent opposition lawyer.

Mozambique was the first non-British former colony to join the Commonwealth in 1995, followed by Rwanda in 2009 and Togo and Gabon, once French-administered territories, as recently as 2022.

Despite the obituaries that have been written for the Commonwealth, these new members obviously see benefits in joining, at least as a gateway to the wider Anglophone world.

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The Commonwealth's main challenge may be that it is still perceived as too British. King Charles III is its symbolic head, while continuing to be monarch of 15 of its members. The latter status may change as more of those states opt to become republics, as Barbados did in 2021.

From this week, the Commonwealth will have a new African secretary-general to replace the Dominican-born British peer and former Labour minister Patricia Scotland, who has held the post since 2016.

The British Nigerian academic 'Funmi Olonisakin recently wrote that the Commonwealth had failed so far to act in concert as a diplomatic counterweight to world powers on critical issues affecting the Global South, where most of its members live.

"Instead, it has appeared content to act as a symbol of Britain's influence in the world - a facet of Britain's colonial legacy," she argued in an article for the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Keir Starmer should perhaps consider addressing that colonial legacy in practical terms in order to help revive the Commonwealth as a unique international

institution based on shared values and global cooperation rather than on geopolitical power plays.