

# One Family

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Exchange 

## Harnessing the Strategic Potential of the Commonwealth

Dr Rakib Ehsan

Introduction by Rt Hon Stephen Harper PC

Foreword by Hon Alexander Downer AC





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## About the Author

**Dr Rakib Ehsan** is a British academic of Bangladeshi and Indian origin who is a senior adviser at Policy Exchange. He has authored work and been interviewed by the media on the Commonwealth of Nations, particularly on the role of the British monarchy and political dynamics within the association. Specialising in matters of democracy, politics, and governance, he authored the Policy Exchange report 'Small-Boats Emergency: Fixing the UK's Broken Asylum System' which was published in July 2023.

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# Introduction

Rt Hon Stephen Harper PC

“The Commonwealth of Nations is a unique international association – 56 member countries spanning the continents, incorporating some of the most dynamic and energetic cities on Earth.

This much-needed report by Policy Exchange rightly calls for the Commonwealth’s strategic potential to be harnessed – especially through the fostering of stronger trade and investment relationships which build on existing advantages based on linguistic, legal, and administrative commonalities. A pro-development agenda for the Commonwealth must focus on championing the potential of private enterprise and acting as a convening asset which brings together key players across the Association’s business communities. Pragmatic and realistic forms of economic co-operation will both increase the Commonwealth’s relevance on the international stage and ensure that it is responsive to the aspirations of its youthful populations.

This paper reminds us of the versatility and potential of the Commonwealth – from trade, to conflict resolution, and even security: I was particularly struck by the possible role for the Commonwealth in assisting Guyana against the depredations of neighbouring Venezuela. This is why I support Policy Exchange’s recommendation for the creation of a new Commonwealth Security and Defence Co-Operation Forum - encouraging joint military and naval exercises as a robust expression of solidarity with member countries facing threats to their territorial integrity.

The Commonwealth should ultimately strive to be a practical international organisation which understands that stability and security are the necessary foundations of sustainable economic prosperity.”

**Rt Hon Stephen Harper PC** is the 22nd Prime Minister of the Canada and Chair of the Policy Exchange Commonwealth Advisory Board.

## Advisory Board

The Advisory Board which was formed by Policy Exchange for this report has provided invaluable support and guidance over the course of the project. The members of the Advisory Board are:

- Rt Hon Stephen Harper PC – 22<sup>nd</sup> Prime Minister of Canada (Chair of Advisory Board)
- Samantha Cohen CVO OBE – Commonwealth Envoy (Australia-Pacific region) and former Deputy Private Secretary to H.M. Queen Elizabeth II
- Hon Alexander Downer AC – former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Australia and Chairman of Trustees, Policy Exchange
- Rosie Glazebrook - Chief Executive of the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council (CWEIC)
- Robert Hardman – Royal biographer and commentator
- H.E. Gaitri Issar Kumar - former High Commissioner of India to the UK
- Mohamed Nasheed GCSK – former President of the Maldives
- Sir Trevor Phillips OBE – Writer, broadcaster and Senior Fellow, Policy Exchange

## Endorsements

“As Chair of the Commonwealth APPG, I welcome Policy Exchange’s new report which provides a compelling case for the UK to inject some much-needed momentum in the Commonwealth of Nations.

In an increasingly contested and volatile international system, there is a need for a cross-continental alliance of like-minded nations who have a shared commitment to common democratic principles, fair economic collaboration, and general human progress.

A confident and self-assured Britain is needed at the heart of the Commonwealth – a family of nations which must remain committed to greater international peace and security.”

**Andrew Rosindell MP** (Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Commonwealth)

“As Co-Chair of the Commonwealth APPG, I welcome Policy Exchange’s much-needed intervention in the debate on how to harness the strategic potential of the Commonwealth of Nations.

In my colleague, David Lammy MP - a senior British Government Minister of proud Guyanese heritage - the United Kingdom has a foreign secretary who is uniquely well positioned to present the case for a more united, proactive, and inclusive Commonwealth. It is a richly-diverse international association of free and equal nations which - together - can help to shape the global agenda on issues such as environmental protection, rights for women and girls, disease prevention, and young people’s educational development.

Our new Labour Government has a golden opportunity to adopt an authentically progressive, inclusive, internationalist, and outward-looking foreign policy agenda which pays worthy attention to the Commonwealth’s potential value and in doing so, it will have my full support.”

**Adam Jjee MP** (Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Commonwealth)



# Acknowledgements

In addition to the members of the Advisory Board, the author would like to extend warm thanks to H.E. Karen-Mae Hill OBE, High Commissioner for Antigua and Barbuda to the United Kingdom and member of the Commonwealth's Board of Governors, for providing her expert insights.

At Policy Exchange, the author thanks Iain Mansfield (Director of Research), Sophia Gaston (Head of Foreign Policy and UK Resilience), Marcus Solarz Hendriks (Senior Research Fellow, National Security Unit), Tom Kennedy (Director of Communications), Sophie Bolsover (Director of Government & Parliamentary Affairs), and Emily Taylor (Digital Communications Manager). Importantly, the author would also like thank both Lord Godson (Director of Policy Exchange) and Julia Mizen (Managing Director of Policy Exchange) for providing me with the opportunity to take on this project. Most of all, the author is grateful to his immediate family for their love, support, and encouragement.

This report was produced by Policy Exchange and the views and recommendations in the report are those of Policy Exchange.

# Contents

About the Author	2
Introduction by Rt Hon Stephen Harper PC	4
Advisory Board	5
Endorsements	6
Acknowledgements	7
Foreword by Hon Alexander Downer AC	9
Executive Summary	11
Summary of Recommendations	17
1. Introduction	20
2: British interest in the Commonwealth	23
3. The Commonwealth, China, and Russia	27
4. Trade and Investment	31
5: Environmental Protection and Public Health	36
6. Education and Social Mobility	40
7. Security and Defence	42
8. Conclusion	47
9. Policy Recommendations	51

# Foreword

*Hon Alexander Downer AC*

In recent times, the Commonwealth of Nations has drifted to the margins of international relations. This has happened at a critical period where the global landscape is more volatile, unpredictable, and fragmented – one where traditional American hegemonic dominance is being contested by revisionist forces who pose a direct challenge to liberal democracy. An international association that spans the continents – one that is bonded by a shared commitment to conventional democratic norms, fair economic collaboration, and empowering young people to fulfil their potential – is needed more than ever.

The Commonwealth of Nations is a truly unique post-colonial endeavour. The UK should take pride in how the late Queen Elizabeth II spearheaded the smooth transition from Empire to Commonwealth – rebuilding the UK's diplomatic relations with former colonial territories which are now independent, sovereign, and established nation-states. The Commonwealth is anything but 'Empire 2.0' – it is a voluntary association of nations and member countries which are free to leave it at any point (in the process losing out on the very real trade and investment advantages offered by the Association due to a shared language, parity of legal systems, and compatible administrative regimes). The inclusive appeal of the Commonwealth is demonstrated by the reality that it incorporates a string of member countries that have no historic and colonial links to Britain – such as Mozambique, Rwanda, and Namibia. The fact that the two most recent additions to the Association were Togo and Gabon – former colonies of the French Empire – was a soft-power victory for the UK which went largely unrecognised there.

There has been a failure in the spheres of British politics, policy, and media to recognise the Commonwealth as a potentially enormous asset for both the UK and emergent friendly nations – to the point that it is at times unthinkingly dismissed as an irrelevant outdated relic of the British Empire. This must change. The new UK Government – which includes a London-born, Guyanese-heritage foreign secretary in the form of Rt Hon David Lammy MP – has a golden chance to not only take the lead on a British diplomatic realignment towards the Commonwealth of Nations, but also play an integral part in fostering a more agile, dynamic, and collaborative international alliance of like-minded nations. The forthcoming 27<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting

(CHOGM) in Apia, Samoa – the first in a Pacific Island nation – presents the new Labour Government with the opportunity to demonstrate its ‘progressive internationalism’ by presenting the case for a modern Commonwealth which blends greater trade and investment co-operation with a strengthened emphasis on environmental protection and social responsibility. Three-fifths of the Commonwealth’s population of 2.5 billion people is aged 29 or under. It must be responsive to the aspirations of academically gifted and entrepreneurial young people in emerging member countries brimming with potential.

However, for the Commonwealth to be a truly relevant international organisation in an increasingly uncertain and complex global arena, it must engage with admittedly sensitive matters of security and defence. While sovereign nation-states have the right to determine their foreign policy agenda independently, the UK-Mauritius controversy surrounding the sovereignty of the Chagos Islands highlighted the risks of not nurturing bonds of mutual understanding within the Commonwealth – tensions between friends are left unresolved, with Britain’s adversaries standing to benefit. The Commonwealth also includes member countries such as Guyana and Belize which are facing threats to their territorial integrity (from Venezuela and Guatemala respectively). This has thrust matters of security and defence within the Association into the spotlight. If the Commonwealth wishes to be a genuine ‘family of nations’, then it must have the collective will to express solidarity with such under-threat members by way of military and naval co-operation. This is why I support Policy Exchange’s recommendation for a new Commonwealth Security and Defence Co-Operation Forum to be established.

With revisionist undemocratic powers looking to remould the fundamentals of the international system, the UK must not neglect the goodwill and affection towards it within the Commonwealth. As the multi-country polling presented in this excellent Policy Exchange report shows, the majority of people in India and Nigeria believe that the UK does more good than harm in the world – which is sadly not the case among Britons themselves. The UK is one of the most successful multi-ethnic democracies in the world, with its Commonwealth-origin minorities making positive contributions to its political, economic, social, and cultural life. This should be a source of national pride. Modern Britain should be a confident and assertive voice on the international stage – one that bangs the drum for an energetic, effective, and future-oriented Commonwealth that harnesses its strategic potential in areas ranging from trade to security. The UK cannot afford to let trusting Commonwealth partners down by paralysing itself through self-flagellation and a lack of confidence over the positive contributions it has made – and will continue to make – towards the advancement of humankind.

**Hon Alexander Downer AC** is a Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Australia and former Australian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom

# Executive Summary

This Policy Exchange report presents the case for a future Commonwealth of Nations which is a practical, dynamic, and effective association in an increasingly volatile international system of shifting alliances. It also explores how the UK can play an integral part in shaping the strategic direction of the Commonwealth, along with significant member countries such as India (which recently overtook China as the world's most populous country).

The report is of the view that the Commonwealth is an international association in need of fresh impetus – and that the UK should be more confident about the Commonwealth's potential value in spreading prosperity, improving environmental sustainability, enabling young people's development, and ultimately contributing towards a more secure and peaceful world. It is vital that the UK does not simply show episodic forms of interest in the Commonwealth. The recent change in government presents a fine opportunity for an outward-looking, internationalist Labour Party to provide the Commonwealth – which has drifted to the margins of international relations in recent times - with much-needed momentum and a stronger sense of purpose. Current UK Foreign Secretary Rt Hon David Lammy MP – born in the global economic and cultural powerhouse of London and of Guyanese origin – is uniquely well-positioned to play a leading role in the fostering of a more dynamic and collaborative Commonwealth 'family of nations'.

*One Family: Harnessing the Strategic Potential of the Commonwealth* argues that fostering a more mutually interdependent Commonwealth should be a key pillar of the UK's foreign policy, with a strong emphasis on deepened co-operation in the spheres of trade and investment. This should incorporate a focus on the economic, social, and institutional development of small-state island countries in the Commonwealth such as Samoa, which is hosting the forthcoming 27<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) – the first time the summit will be held in a Pacific-island member country. Along with trade and investment, this report focuses on three other areas where the Commonwealth should strengthen and enhance member-country collaboration: environmental sustainability and climate migration (viewed through the lens of public health), education and social mobility, and security and defence. The last area has been thrust into the spotlight because of Venezuela's depredations in the oil-rich Essequibo region of Commonwealth member country Guyana, which has raised important questions about whether the Association could provide a platform for wider defence and security cooperation.

This would provide a drifting Commonwealth with a renewed sense of purpose and relevance – increasing its international influence in critical areas of human development and security. Importantly, this would provide aspirational and developing member countries with an organisational framework where they can pursue greater economic, cultural, and security-oriented opportunities – one based on trust and mutual respect, and free of direct American and Chinese involvement in terms of membership. The geopolitical environment has decisively shifted, ushering in a global landscape which is more fragmented and volatile than at any time this millennium. Russian and Chinese influence is spreading at an alarming rate throughout the non-aligned world – most clearly witnessed in Moscow’s embedment in Francafrique, and China’s ability to bring over 50 African heads of state to Beijing last month for the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. This report calls for the UK to promote the Commonwealth of Nations as an international association of like-minded nations which is based on a shared commitment to common democratic norms, fair economic collaboration, and the empowerment of human potential – a potential counterpoint to revisionist undemocratic forces in the international system. While independent nation-states are well within their right to foster relationships in ways they see fit, the UK-Mauritius controversy surrounding the sovereignty of the Chagos Islands revealed the risks of not properly nurturing and valuing relationships within the Commonwealth – tensions between friends are left unresolved, with Britain’s adversaries standing to benefit.

It is vital, however, that the Commonwealth is not a top-down organisation and does not pursue objectives which do not command meaningful public consent and support across the Association. The Commonwealth must guard against becoming an ‘elite’ endeavour which comes across as distant and irrelevant – it must strive to be a co-operative family of ‘free and equal’ nations which implements policies and orchestrates activities which are reflective of the key aspirations across the publics of the Association; both aware of and responsive to the main concerns of citizens. To gain a better understanding of the public attitudes towards the Commonwealth of Nations – especially the strategic aims and policy objectives people believe it should prioritise as a cross-continental association – Policy Exchange commissioned British Polling Council (BPC) member Opinium to carry out nationally-representative polling in the UK, along with the four following member countries: India, Australia, Nigeria, and Malaysia. In total, these five markets incorporate a comfortable majority of the Commonwealth’s people and around one-fifth of the world’s entire population.

The UK polling of 2,050 adults – weighted to be both nationally and politically representative – took place between 17-19 May 2023 (shortly after the Coronation of King Charles III, which was held on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2023). The fieldwork for the surveys conducted in India, Australia, Nigeria, and Malaysia took place after the UK survey was carried out (28th July – 4th August 2023). The samples for all four countries were nationally

representative, with these being the following sizes for each market: India (1,012 respondents); Nigeria (1,066 respondents); Australia (1,032 respondents) and Malaysia (also 1,032 respondents). Based on this groundbreaking polling, a number of areas of opportunity for deepened co-operation – underscored by public support and consent – were identified:

### The UK polling

The UK polling revealed a somewhat concerning level of public disinterest in the Commonwealth – with three in ten people (30%) either being unable to pinpoint a benefit of being a member of the Association, or believing that no benefits exist. This figure drops to 3% and 6% for their Nigerian and Indian counterparts respectively. This highlights a failure of political leadership in terms of championing the UK’s role in the Commonwealth and the multi-faceted advantages that come with being a leading member of a like-minded association which incorporates a shared official language, similar legal systems, and familiar administrative frameworks. However, and in keeping with both Britain’s liberal economic traditions and the core provisions of the Commonwealth Charter, there are high levels of British public support for the international organisation to explore ways to reduce trade barriers among its member countries. There is also considerable public appetite for Commonwealth members to work more closely to tackle environmental and health challenges (such as disease prevention and control).

- More than three in five UK adults believe that the Commonwealth should encourage the removal or reduction of barriers to trade between its members – 63%.
- When given a list of areas and asked what the Commonwealth should prioritise in terms of co-operation between members, the most popular choices among UK adults are the environment (34%), tackling health problems (31%), trade and investment (28%) and democracy promotion/human rights (also 28%).<sup>1</sup>

### The Commonwealth and the international order

While sovereign Commonwealth member countries have the right to determine their foreign policy agenda towards countries which are considered hostile foreign regimes from a conventional UK perspective (such as China and Russia), there is an argument for the international organisation to offer greater economic, cultural, and security-oriented opportunities for lesser-developed countries within the Association – providing alternatives based on trust and mutual respect. A more cohesive and mutually interdependent Commonwealth would allow aspirational and emerging countries to wean off forms of dependency on Chinese and Russian investments – something that takes place organically over time. This form of thinking commands majority-level support among the British public – with nearly half also believing that the Commonwealth

1. Respondents were given the following choices (and asked to select up to three): tackling environment/climate change; tackling health problems (such as disease prevention); promoting democracy/human rights; trade and investment between members; improving education; coordination of counter-extremism/counter-terrorism; increasing joint food security; increasing joint energy security; coordination of defence and military; sharing of technology/cybersecurity; promoting arts/culture. Respondents also had the option to specify another option or report ‘don’t know’.

should invite Ukraine to submit a membership application, to assist with its own post-war reconstruction.

- Nearly three in five UK adults – 58% - are of the view that the Commonwealth should support its members to reduce their economic dependence on financial investment, loans, and goods imports from countries such as China.
- A comfortable majority of UK adults – 66% - believe that the Commonwealth should support its members to reduce their dependence on military and security investments made by Russia.
- Nearly half of UK adults – 49% - think that the Commonwealth should invite Ukraine to submit a membership application.

### The Non-UK polling

Polling was also conducted by Opinium in four other Commonwealth member states: India, Nigeria, Australia, and Malaysia.

One of the most interesting findings to emerge from the polling – which was supported by the insights provided in one-on-one interviews with relevant experts with a strong background in international diplomacy – was that when compared to Indian, Nigerian, Malaysian, and Australian respondents, members of the British public were the least likely to believe that the UK does more good than harm in the world overall. This suggests a certain lack of national self-confidence over Britain’s historic contributions to human advancement and cultural scepticism over the UK’s moral standing in the modern international system – views which are not widely shared among the Indian and Nigerian publics.

The surveys conducted in India, Nigeria, Australia, and Malaysia found that there are strong preferences for the Commonwealth to strengthen forms of co-operation in the spheres of trade and investment, democracy/human rights, and tackling climate change. There is especially strong appetite among the Australian public for the Commonwealth to achieve goals which have the potential to counter both the international influence of the Kremlin and thwart the Chinese communist regime’s efforts to gain a serious foothold in regions such as Pacific (by focusing more on assisting with the economic, social, and institutional development of its smaller member countries). Interestingly, the highest level of support for the Commonwealth to invite Ukraine to submit a membership application was found in the Indian and Nigerian markets (possibly due to food-security considerations and the usefulness of Ukrainian-cultivated agricultural produce for these economies).

- UK respondents were the least likely to agree with the view that the UK does more good than harm in the world (47%). The highest level of agreement was found in the polling for India (59%), followed by Nigeria (51%), Malaysia (50%) and Australia (48%).
- When given a list of areas and asked what the Commonwealth should prioritise in terms of co-operation between members, the



most popular choices when putting together the preferences of Australian, Indian, Nigerian, and Malaysian respondents polled are trade and investment (34%), democracy promotion and human rights (also 34%) and tackling climate change (31%).<sup>2</sup>

- Nearly six in ten Australian respondents – 59% - believe that it is in their country’s national interest that the Commonwealth focuses more on helping the economic, social, and institutional development of its smaller member countries, with the aim of countering Chinese power and influence in parts of the world such as the Pacific.
- Two in three Australian respondents – 66% - agree with the view that one of the Commonwealth’s objectives should be limiting the international influence of Russia (slightly higher than the corresponding figure in the UK polling – 65%). There is also majority support for this in Nigeria (59%) and India (57%). It drops to 42% for Malaysia.
- Replicating polling in the UK, 49% of Australian respondents believe that the Commonwealth inviting Ukraine to submit a membership application is a good idea. This rises to 55% for Malaysia, 74% for Nigeria, and 75% for India.

### Selected recommendations

Based on the input of the Advisory Board established by Policy Exchange for this project (which was chaired by the former Prime Minister of Canada, The Rt Hon Stephen Harper PC), along with the insights of expert interviewees and the findings of the five-country polling, the report makes a number of recommendations, including the following:

- The new Labour Government should seek to amplify British national interests and cultivate domestic social cohesion in multi-racial Britain by ensuring that the Commonwealth is better factored into the UK’s foreign policy thinking.
- The Commonwealth should have the central objective of establishing itself as a gold-standard convening asset which advances the voice and interests of smaller member countries - one that specialises in providing technical expertise on issues such as climate resilience.
- William, Prince of Wales, should play a key role – as an inclusive non-political figure – in promoting environmental sustainability across the Commonwealth, expressing support for green-energy transitions and the Association’s ‘blue economy’ agenda.
- There should be a renewed emphasis on trade and investment which better incorporates the expert views of India’s thriving business communities in cities such as Mumbai, with a view to fostering closer economic partnerships and alliances across continents.
- The creation of a new Security & Defence Co-operation Forum

2. Ibid.

which encourages joint and collective military and naval exercises, along with the pooling of resources to enhance cybersecurity capabilities.

- The Commonwealth should adopt a policy of ‘strategic expansion’ to facilitate the broadening of its membership into the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region – increasing its engagement with UK-friendly emerging economies such as Morocco and Oman.

# Summary of Recommendations

## **1. Progressive Labour government promoting modern Britain's place in the Commonwealth**

The new Labour ~Government should promote the Commonwealth as a diverse but like-minded international forum for stronger co-operation on issues such as reducing poverty, supporting social enterprise, improving environmental sustainability, and protecting basic human rights.

## **2. Promotion of the Commonwealth and British historic contributions in schools**

Alongside the promotion of the Commonwealth as a successful example of rebuilding ties in the post-colonial era, the history curriculum in British schools should be more reflective of the mainstream view across the UK (as well as prominent members of the Commonwealth such as India and Nigeria) – that Britain, overall, has contributed more good than harm to the world.

## **3. The Commonwealth as a convening asset of technical expertise and guidance**

The Commonwealth should have the central objective of being a dynamic convening actor in the international system – one that prides itself on providing high-quality technical guidance. It can function as “The Connector” – viewed as a dynamic ‘switchboard’ by its member-states.

## **4. Renewed emphasis on good governance and sound regulation**

The Commonwealth should aim to establish itself as a gold-standard example of providing advice on matters of regulatory governance – especially on occupational health and safety, which remains a significant problem in a significant proportion of its member countries.

## **5. Establishing a new Commonwealth Trade & Investment Commission**

The Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda for Trade and Investment (CCA), should be repurposed and rebranded as a new Commonwealth Trade & Investment Commission (CTIC) – one that explores the maximisation of mutual gains through the reduction of barriers in the Association.

## **6. Encouraging intercontinental forms of ‘triangular’ economic co-operation**

The Commonwealth can encourage three-nation agreements which are centred on areas such as digital finance (one example could be a UK-

India-Nigeria triangular arrangement which would incorporate the major financial centres of London, Mumbai, and Lagos).

### **7. Tackling air pollution in the name of public health and sustainable economic development**

While air pollution is considered by some to be a ‘necessary evil’ in the name of industrialisation, the Commonwealth’s official position should be that it can have a long-term negative impact on economic growth, workforce productivity, and broader human welfare – working with member countries to achieve ‘greener’ forms of development.

### **8. UK-led mobilisation of private capital for green-energy transition in the Commonwealth**

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions and mitigating climate change should be a priority for the Association, with its members facing a variety of environmental challenges. An integral part of this task will be establishing innovative ways to mobilise private capital. The UK – via The City – has world-leading expertise in this which should be leveraged.

### **9. Taking the lead on the ‘blue economy’ agenda**

The Commonwealth should provide logistical support for small-state islands to access finance in order to foster sustainable ‘blue’ economies – encouraging the innovative stewardship of oceans and building economic instruments to leverage environmental protection.

### **10. Key role for Prince William in promoting environmental issues in the Commonwealth**

Being one of the world’s most high-profile campaigners and advocates in the field of environmentalism, William, Prince of Wales can play a key role in this area – an inclusive non-political British figure banging the drum for green-energy transitions across the Commonwealth and promoting the Association’s ‘blue economy’ agenda.

### **11. Developing the future leaders of the Commonwealth in line with the Charter’s values**

The Commonwealth should ensure that its educational focus is towards encouraging the development of ‘future leaders’. The UK should take the lead on this front – having organisations which specialise in providing international cultural and educational opportunities (such as the British Council).

### **12. Cross-Commonwealth skills development drive modelled on UK scholarships**

Commonwealth countries such as Australia, Canada, and India, should create similar schemes to the UK’s Chevening scholarship – driving academic excellence, professional development, and intercultural knowledge exchange through a ‘family’ of pro-youth mobility schemes.

### **13. Creation of a new Commonwealth Defence & Security Co-Operation Forum**

Within the Commonwealth, there should be the creation of a new 'defence & security co-operation forum' where strategically-aligned, developed member countries with highly-trained armies offering their training services through the holding of joint military exercises with lesser-developed member countries facing threats to their territorial integrity (such as Guyana and Belize).

### **14. Navy and Coast Guard collaboration involving small-state islands in the Commonwealth**

The Commonwealth should facilitate and enable Navy/Coast Guard collaboration between relevant member-states. This can take the shape of joint exercises which create greater training opportunities, strategic collaboration in areas such as humanitarian crisis management, and the sharing of maintenance efforts to enhance collective naval readiness.

### **15. Enabling policing and law-enforcement alliances and partnerships**

The Commonwealth should take steps to explore ways that larger industrialised democracies with traditionally high levels of public trust in law-enforcement institutions (such as Canada) can assist with the training of police forces in smaller member countries.

### **16. Establishing a more cyber-secure Commonwealth for the digital age**

In the more technological sphere, the Commonwealth should strive to be a hub of technical expertise and expert guidance when it comes to shaping capacity development initiatives designed to strengthen member-state cybersecurity capabilities.

### **17. Broadening the Commonwealth family of nations into the MENA region**

The Commonwealth family of nations is one that spans a variety of world regions, but it should adopt a policy of 'strategic expansion' – looking to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region for potential new members which can add genuine multi-faceted value to the Association (such as Morocco and Oman).

# 1. Introduction

With the recent election of a new government, there is a need for the UK to establish a foreign policy agenda which commands greater respect both at home and abroad – one that provides Britain with a sense of purpose and identity on the international stage. The forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Samoa – the 27<sup>th</sup> overall but the first in a Pacific Island nation – presents a golden opportunity for the UK Government to flesh out and articulate its vision for the Association and global co-operation at large. While the Commonwealth has drifted to the margins of international relations in recent years, it remains an international organisation brimming with potential – but is one in need of urgent revitalisation. At best, the UK Government has shown episodic interest in the Commonwealth – usually surrounding events such as the 2018 CHOGM held in London and Windsor. The change of government in the UK – which currently has a Guyanese-origin Foreign Secretary (Rt Hon David Lammy MP) and Pakistani-heritage Justice Secretary (Rt Hon Shabana Mahmood MP) - presents a golden opportunity for ‘Global Britain’ to inject some much-needed momentum in the Commonwealth.

This report is unapologetically of the view that there is a golden opportunity for the UK to invest more time, energy, and resources into re-orientating its foreign policy agenda more towards the Commonwealth of Nations – which includes fellow members of the Anglosphere and ‘Five Eyes’ intelligence alliance (Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) as well as India - the second-most populous country and largest multi-party democracy in the world. Australia and India are also members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) along with the United States and Japan, with the former – along with the UK, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore – being part of the all-Commonwealth ‘Five Power Defence Arrangements’ (FPDA). The Commonwealth also includes Nigeria – the world’s sixth-most populous country which incorporates Lagos, a leading African financial and commercial centre that is one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world. An incredibly diverse voluntary association of nations, the Commonwealth’s ethnic, racial, and religious heterogeneity is embodied by member countries such as Malaysia – a multi-ethnic, multi-faith, and multi-lingual country in southeast Asia which has a model of government based on the Westminster parliamentary system. It includes a swathe of Caribbean member countries which have strong historical and cultural ties with Britain. There have been calls in support of

slavery-related ‘reparatory justice’ by organisations such as the CARICOM Reparations Commission, with reparations-related demonstrations being held in countries such as Jamaica and the Bahamas during recent royal visits.<sup>3</sup> This report presents the case for an inclusive and future-oriented Commonwealth of Nations that encourages the deepening of trade and investment relationships within the Association – fostering closer economic alliances which incorporate both the UK and aspirational Caribbean member countries.

The UK Government’s Integration Review ‘Refresh’ published in March 2023 (and updated in May 2023), represented an official update of its “security, defence, development and foreign policy priorities to reflect changes in the global context since the Integration Review 2021”.<sup>4</sup> The 2023 ‘refresh’ includes four main pillars: 1) shape the international environment; 2) deter, defend, and compete across all domains; 3) address vulnerabilities through resilience; and 4) generate strategic advantage.<sup>5</sup> The 2023 Integration Review clearly states the UK’s intention to “strengthen the Commonwealth” – such as bolstering trade activities within the Association, supporting member countries in their efforts to attract inward investment, and heightening the resilience of the “most vulnerable members to climate change, nature loss and environmental degradation”.<sup>6</sup> The Government also expresses its intention to protect and promote the soft and cultural power that the UK has internationally – integrating this more into its wider foreign-policy approach and hoping to achieve this through the Commonwealth and other institutions.<sup>7</sup> The Integrated Review also promotes closer co-operation between the G7 and Commonwealth partners Australia and India (along with South Korea) – forming the so-called D-10 ‘club of democracies’.<sup>8</sup>

Ahead of the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Apia, Samoa, the first in a small-state developing Pacific state and the first since the passing of Queen Elizabeth II, UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy hosted a reception marking 75 years of the modern Commonwealth – describing the Association as a “wonderful, modern, diverse story” as well as advancing the view that the organisation is vital to tackling the most testing global challenges of today.<sup>9</sup> In the same speech, the Foreign Secretary referred to the “enormous legacy” of the late Queen Elizabeth II in cementing the ties between Commonwealth members in the post-colonial world, as well as King Charles III’s vision of a ‘family of nations’ working together and being collectively strengthened by sharing their diverse perspectives and experiences.<sup>10</sup> The role of the head of the British monarchy in terms of providing leadership in the Commonwealth – a central figurehead that resides above conventional politics – remains as important as ever.

This report presents the case for the reimagining of the Commonwealth as a more cohesive association of nations that can deepen interdependence and co-operation in the volatile and unpredictable global environment of today. Following this introductory section, the report considers the level of public interest in and understanding of the Commonwealth. This

3. Ng, K. (2022), ‘Why are Prince William and Kate facing protests in the Caribbean?’, *The Independent*, 23 March. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/royal-family/prince-william-kate-middleton-caribbean-protests-b2042362.html>, last accessed: 3 October 2024.
4. UK Government (2023), ‘Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world’, 13 March. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. GOV.UK (2024), ‘75 years of the modern Commonwealth: Foreign Secretary’s speech’, 6 September. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/75-years-of-the-modern-commonwealth-for-foreign-secretarys-speech>, last accessed: 7 September 2024.
10. *Ibid.*

is followed by the relationship Commonwealth member countries of interest (especially those which have been polled for this report) have with China and Russia. After this section, the report considers four areas where the Commonwealth can deepen co-operation between its member countries: trade and investment, environmental health, education and youth social mobility, and security and defence. The report concludes with a set of recommendations designed to provide the Commonwealth of Nations with a renewed sense of purpose and direction – a more cohesive and relevant international association in terms of meeting the world's stiffer challenges; a voluntary collective which strengthens internal co-operation across a range of areas which can practically improve the lives of Commonwealth citizens.



## 2: British interest in the Commonwealth

Eight years on from the UK's referendum on EU membership which resulted in its eventual departure from the European Union (EU), there remains significant questions over how it can most effectively promote British national interest in global affairs and strengthen its relevance in the international system. Part of this relates to the role the Commonwealth of Nations should play in British foreign-policy objectives such as working towards greater international peace and security, as well as shaping the international agenda across a variety of policy spheres – such as trade, young people's education, climate change, and security.

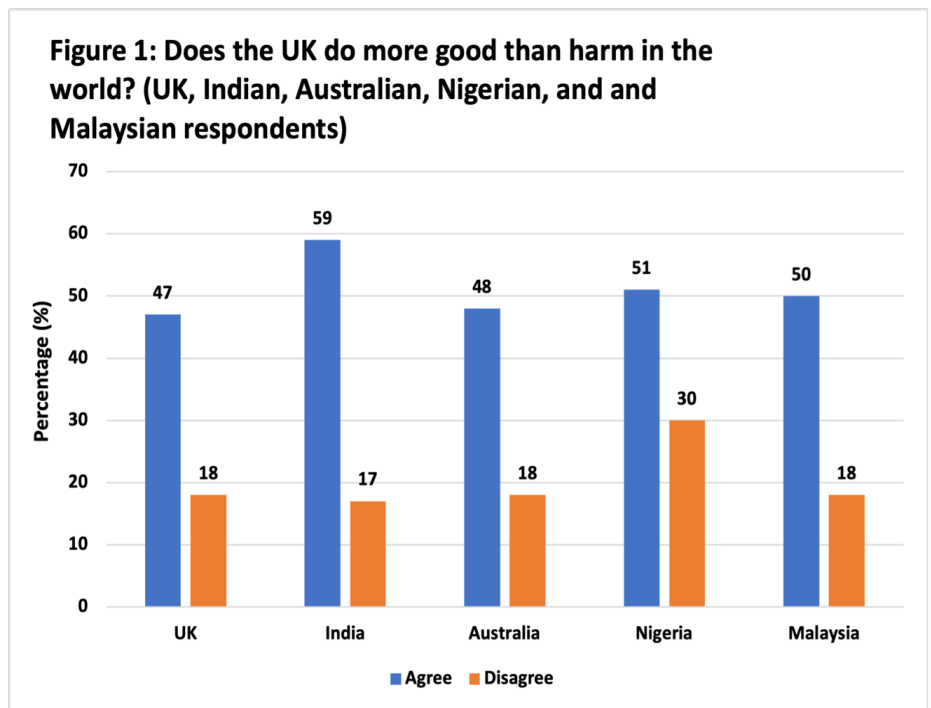
However, there is an urgent need to present a compelling and convincing case for the Commonwealth – especially in the UK, where it is viewed by some as an outdated and irrelevant relic of the British Empire. This relates with broader national conversations on Britain's history, heritage, and traditions – such as the nature of Britain's historic contributions to the world, its relationship with its imperialistic past, and the role of the British monarchy in the modern world. Indeed, there has been an erosion of national self-confidence – partly due to 'generational replacement' but also the proliferation of negatively skewed understandings and portrayals of British history, heritage, and traditions which has been driven by the 'decolonisation' movement.<sup>11</sup> This was demonstrated in the most alarming of terms by a recent National Centre for Social Research study, which found that from 2013 to 2023, the percentage of Britons who said they were proud of Britain's history had fallen sharply from 86% to 64%.<sup>12</sup>

If the UK is to fashion itself as a relevant global actor through international fora in the post-Brexit and increasingly multipolar world, there is an urgent need for both the British political establishment and wider civil society to promote a more positive account of Britain's history and to heighten public awareness of the Commonwealth's history, core values, and key objectives. There is, in some quarters, a fundamental misunderstanding of what the Commonwealth represents – its history, origins, and purpose. This includes the international organisation being unhelpfully described by some as 'Empire 2.0'.<sup>13</sup> The reality is that the Commonwealth is a voluntary association which is respectful of national sovereignty and includes countries such as Mozambique – which joined the Commonwealth as recently as 1995 and has no connections to the British Empire (being a former Portuguese colony).

The nationally-representative polling carried out in the UK, along

11. Norrie, R. (2023), 'Once more unto breach: arguments against decolonisation', *Don't Divide Us (DDU)*, 8 June. Available at: <https://dontdivideus.com/2023/06/08/once-more-onto-the-breach-arguments-against-decolonisation/>, last accessed: 1 October 2024.
12. Curtice, J. and Scholes, A. (2024), 'British Social Attitudes 41: National Identity', *National Centre for Social Research*, September. Available at: <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-09/british-social-attitudes-41-%7C-national-identity-1377.pdf>, last accessed 27 September 2024.
13. Vaswani, K. (2017), 'Empire 2.0? Banging the drum for UK business in India', *BBC News*, 5 April. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-39500866>, last accessed: 2 October 2024.

with India, Australia, Nigeria, and Malaysia, suggest that there has been a failure in British political leadership when it comes to providing a positive presentation of Britain’s historic contributions to the world, as well as its involvement in the Commonwealth. Compared to other Commonwealth markets – especially the Indian public which represents 60% of the Association’s overall population – the British people are less likely to have a positive view of Britain’s general contributions to the world and are more likely to be unsure (and unconvinced) of the benefits of Commonwealth membership.



**Figure 1** shows the survey results after respondents in the UK, India, Australia, Nigeria, and Malaysia were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “In general, the UK as a country does more good than harm in the world”.<sup>14</sup>

The data shows that the highest level of agreement with the perspective that the UK generally does more good than harm in the world is among the Indian respondents – with nearly three in five agreeing with this view (59%) and 17% disagreeing with it (giving a net agreement rating of +42). The second-highest net agreeing rating can be found among Malaysian respondents (+32) – with 50% agreeing with this view and 18% disagreeing with it.

The figures for the UK and Australian respondents are near-identical – with 18% within both markets disagreeing with the view that the UK is generally a force for good than harm in the world (with 48% of Australian respondents agreeing, with is marginally higher than the corresponding figure of 47% in the UK market). While more than half of the Nigerian respondents agreed with the view that the UK does more good than

14. The “agree” figure has been calculated by combining the “strongly agree” and “somewhat agree” responses; the “disagree” figure has been calculated by combining the “strongly disagree” and “somewhat disagree” responses.

harm in the world overall (51%), 30% disagreed with this perspective – providing the lowest net agreement rating of +21 across the five national markets.

**Table 1: What is valued as the greatest benefit of the Commonwealth (UK, Indian, Australian, Nigerian, and Malaysian respondents)**

	The UK	India	Australia	Nigeria	Malaysia
Advantage of trading between Commonwealth countries	43%	52%	47%	58%	52%
A forum for a diverse range of countries to come together to discuss global challenges	36%	46%	35%	53%	42%
The opportunity to enjoy shared cultural and sporting events	32%	49%	33%	43%	43%
Democratic principles, governance, election monitoring and upholding human rights	30%	46%	40%	52%	47%
Shared legal systems based on UK common law	16%	21%	22%	13%	34%
Don't know	21%	4%	10%	2%	7%
There are no benefits to being in the Commonwealth	10%	2%	8%	1%	2%

**Table 1** presents survey results from all five national markets: the UK, India, Australia, Nigeria, and Malaysia. Respondents were asked the following: “The Commonwealth of Nations, known as ‘the Commonwealth’, is a political association of 56 member states, the vast majority of which are former territories of the British Empire. Which of the following do you value as the greatest benefit of the Commonwealth, if any? Please select up to three options.”

In each of the five national markets, the most popular option when respondents were asked what they value as the greatest benefit of the Commonwealth was the advantage of trading between its member countries – with more than half of the Nigerian, Indian, and Malaysian markets selecting this (58%, 52%, and 52% respectively). The majority of Nigerian respondents also selected the Commonwealth as “a forum for a diverse range of countries to come together to discuss global challenges” (53%) and association’s “democratic principles, governance, election

monitoring and upholding human rights” (52%). The second-most popular choice for Indian respondents was the Commonwealth presenting “an opportunity to enjoy shared cultural and sporting events” (49%) – the highest figure for this stated benefit across the five national markets. This option was also selected by more than two in five respondents in Nigerian and Malaysian markets (43% within both).

There is considerable variance when it comes to the selection of certain stated benefits. While one in three Malaysian respondents selected “shared legal systems based on UK common law” as one of the greatest benefits of the Commonwealth (34%), this drops down to 16% and 13% among UK and Nigerian respondents respectively.

There are also notable differences between the national markets when it comes to thinking that there are no benefits to being in the Commonwealth. While one per cent of Nigerian respondents selected this option, this rises to 8% and 10% for the Australian and UK markets respectively. While only two per cent of Nigerian respondents and four per cent of Indian respondents responded “don’t know” to this survey question, this rose to more than one in five respondents in the UK polling (21%). This means that in the UK, three in ten people – 31% - either believe that there are no benefits to being a member of the Commonwealth or do not have a clear view on what the benefits are. The corresponding figures for the Nigerian and Indian markets are 3% and 6% respectively.

## 3. The Commonwealth, China, and Russia

In an increasingly competitive and volatile multi-polar international system, there is much debate over how the UK can continue to exercise a relevant degree of international power and influence in the post-Brexit context through international associations such as the Commonwealth of Nations – which itself includes rising economic, political, and cultural member countries such as India (which is now the world’s most-populous country) and traditional long-standing diplomatic and security allies such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. However, there have been recent agreements in various spheres of activity which have been struck between Commonwealth member countries and revisionist-minded non-democracies such as China and Russia.

In recent times, China has sought to increase its clout and influence within the Commonwealth of Nations, seeking to interfere and revise it as an international body steeped in liberal values. It has been advanced that this is of “central importance to the Chinese Communist Party’s long-term strategic agenda of circumnavigating and ultimately replacing the liberal rules-based international order”.<sup>15</sup> In the past decade or so, this Chinese-state engagement with economies of the Commonwealth and their political systems has risen considerably in Africa, the Caribbean, and the South Pacific.

The Chinese Communist regime has made inroads into the Commonwealth – with Beijing seeking to lure member countries into its orbit with the promise of financial, infrastructural, and technological support – with there being a notable acceleration in Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) to such regions (including prominent Commonwealth member countries such as Nigeria). A growing number of Commonwealth nations across these three regions are increasingly becoming export-reliant on China, at the same time as accepting large high-interest loans by Chinese creditors for infrastructure programs under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This is part of China’s policy of ‘debt entrapment’ – loaning unmanageable sums to countries and which are then coerced into servicing their debts by “offering China access to resources, trade opportunities and locations for military bases”.<sup>16</sup>

In recent times, China has also sought to heighten its presence in the strategically sensitive Indo-Pacific region – recently striking a bilateral security pact with the Solomon Islands, which has stoked concerns that Beijing intends to establish a military base which would be under 2,000

15. Clark, R. (2023), ‘China’s increasing influence in the Commonwealth of Nations: A triad of trade, diplomacy, and military relations’, February.

16. Vines, A. and Wallace, J. (2023), ‘China-Africa Relations’, *Chatham House*, 18 January. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/01/china-africa-relations>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.

kilometres from Australia.<sup>17</sup> China also struck a policing co-operation agreement with Fiji back in 2011, which the newly-elected government is currently reviewing with the possibility of termination (with Chinese diplomats blaming Australia for ‘sabotaging’ Chinese-Fijian diplomatic ties).<sup>18</sup> There has also been Chinese-state involvement in Vanuatu, with reports that China is working towards the establishment of a permanent military base in the Pacific country, as well as funding the development of a new wharf on Espiritu Santo (the largest island of Vanuatu) – which Australian officials have suspected could be used to host naval vessels. China also has a history of ‘donating’ military vehicles to the Commonwealth member country. Last year, it sent police experts and equipment to the Vanuatu in the middle of a political crisis that saw the Supreme Court rule the prime minister lost a no-confidence vote in parliament.<sup>19</sup> This further underscored the Chinese communist regime’s enthusiasm for building defence and security co-operation with smaller Commonwealth nations in the Pacific region.

China has also made headway in terms of striking agreements with other prominent Asian members of the Commonwealth – including Malaysia, which is one of the five national markets specifically polled for this report. On a visit to China in November 2016, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak, announced ties between the two countries were “set to reach new highs” after the two countries signed a series of agreements on energy and defence.<sup>20</sup> This included the signing of fourteen agreements. Razak endorsed Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), promoting greater Chinese direct investment into the Malaysian economy, and facilitated greater military and security bonds by holding combined military exercises and procuring Chinese-manufactured weapon systems. Malaysia has several Chinese Belt and Road Initiative projects under construction, including the East Coast Rail Line (ECRL), Kuantan Port Expansion, Green Technology Park in Pahang, Forest City, Robotic Future City, and Samalaju Industrial Park Steel Complex. However, there have also been recent tensions between China and Malaysia over South China Sea disputes and cultural clashes such as the Malaysian authorities refusing to approve the 2021 Chinese film ‘The Battle at Lake Changjin’ for release (on the grounds that dissemination of pro-communist material is illegal in the Commonwealth member country).<sup>21</sup>

Another integral part of post-Brexit UK foreign policy is not only developing alliances to counter the internationally-coercive Chinese communist regime, but also against the aggressive militarism of the Kremlin following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While the UK has established itself a major diplomatic ally of Ukraine during the ongoing conflict, voting patterns at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) show that the Commonwealth is far from singing from the same hymn sheet when it comes to the Russo-Ukrainian War. While most countries – including the UK – voted in favour of UNGA resolution condemning the invasion of Ukraine and demanding the withdrawal of

17. The Guardian (2022), ‘Really concerning’: China finalising security deal with Solomon Islands to base warships in the Pacific’, 24 March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/24/china-finalising-security-deal-with-solomon-islands-to-base-warships-in-the-pacific>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.
18. Dziedzic, S. (2023), ‘Australia accused of undermining Fiji-China relationship, amid uncertainty over police agreement’, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 8 May. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-08/china-accuses-australia-of-sabotaging-fiji-relationship/102317374>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.
19. Reuters (2023), ‘Chinese police experts arrive in Vanuatu amid political crisis’, 26 August. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-police-experts-arrive-vanuatu-amid-political-crisis-2023-08-26/>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.
20. Berlinger, J. (2016), ‘Malaysia reaches ‘significant’ defense deal with China, takes shot at West’, CNN, 2 November. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/02/asia/malaysia-china-agreement/>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.
21. Ramachandran, N. (2021), ‘Malaysia Bans Chinese war movie ‘The Battle at Lake Changjin’ – Global Bulletin’, *Variety*, 22 November. Available at: <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/the-battle-at-lake-changjin-malaysia-ban-1235117381/>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.

Russian military personnel, there were several notable Commonwealth abstentions such as India and South Africa.<sup>22</sup> India – along with fellow Commonwealth member countries Pakistan, Namibia, and Cameroon – also abstained on a UN Human Rights Council vote to form an independent international commission of inquiry on Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine. The votes served as a reminder that while enduring ties with Commonwealth nations have been emphasised in the UK’s pro-Brexit discourse, there are limits to how effectively the UK can lead on fostering closer political union in this context – due to ‘special relationships’ and ‘emotional loyalties’ which date back to the Cold War.

In this context, understanding the background of India-Russia relations is important. Moscow-Delhi relations date back to 1955. During the Cold War, India and the Soviet Union shared a strong diplomatic, military, strategic and economic relationship, including actively supporting Bangladesh’s 1971 liberation struggle against America-backed Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> Following the dissolution of the USSR, Russia — as the successor state to the Soviet Union — inherited this ‘special and privileged’ strategic partnership. Former Indian foreign secretary and Indian High Commissioner of the UK, Ranjan Mathai, went as far as to describe Russia as “perhaps the most vital, most decisive” of India’s global partners in 2012. Much of the work done between the two countries in the post-Cold War system has been through the India-Russia Intergovernmental Commission (IRIGC). Traditionally, the Indo-Russian ‘strategic pentagon’ is built on five core components: politics, defence, anti-terrorism, civil nuclear energy & space, with a recent deepening of bilateral trade adding a sixth ‘economic’ component.<sup>24</sup> Both ‘BRIC’ nations are also members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation — a mutual political, economic and security alliance which also includes China and former Soviet nation-states in the shape of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.<sup>25</sup>

In recent times, the Kremlin has also struck military and security agreements with prominent Commonwealth member countries. In 2017, Russia and Nigeria signed an agreement on deepening military cooperation, which was followed by an August 2021 bilateral agreement for the Russian Armed Forces to train and supply their Nigerian counterparts (a deal signed in Moscow by Nigerian Minister of Defence [Bashir Salihi Magashi] and Russia’s director of Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation [Dmitry Shugaev]).<sup>26</sup> There is a historic legacy of Moscow providing Nigeria with military assistance, with the USSR supporting the Nigerian government both politically and militarily during the 1967-1970 Nigerian civil war (between Nigeria and the secessionist Republic of Biafra).<sup>27</sup>

There have also been notable forms of security collaboration between Russia and Malaysia. In May 2007, Malaysian Minister of Science, Technology, and Innovation - Allahyarham Jamaluddin Jarjis - announced that two Malaysian candidates for astronauts were scheduled to undergo training in Moscow as part of a billion-dollar deal for eighteen Sukhoi Su-30MKM fighter jets.<sup>28</sup> One of the two candidates, Sheikh Muszaphar

22. Ehsan, R. (2022), ‘The attack on Ukraine has shown Brexit Britain the limits of its Commonwealth ties’, 8 March. Available at: <https://capx.co/the-attack-on-ukraine-has-shown-brexit-britain-the-limits-of-its-commonwealth-ties/>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.
23. Ehsan, R. (2022), ‘Why India abstained on the UN resolution over Ukraine’, UnHerd, 3 March. Available at: <https://unherd.com/newsroom/why-india-abstained-on-un-resolution-over-ukraine/>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.
24. The Hindu Bureau (2023), ‘India, Russia agree to deepen trade and economic relations’, 18 April. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-russia-discussed-trade-deficit-and-market-access-during-inter-governmental-commission-meeting/article66752813.ece>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.
25. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: <https://eng.sectsc.org/>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.
26. VOA News (2021), ‘Nigeria, Russia Sign Military Agreement’, 27 August. Available at: [https://www.voanews.com/a/africa\\_nigeria-russia-sign-military-agreement/6210035.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_nigeria-russia-sign-military-agreement/6210035.html), last accessed: 4 April 2024.
27. Stent, A. (1973), ‘The Soviet Union and the Nigerian Civil War: A Triumph of Realism’, *A Journal of Opinion*, 3(2): 43-48.
28. Terra Daily (2007), ‘Malaysian Astronauts Head To NASA For Training’, 20 May. Available at: [https://www.terradaily.com/reports/Malaysian\\_Astronauts\\_Head\\_To\\_NASA\\_For\\_Training\\_999.html](https://www.terradaily.com/reports/Malaysian_Astronauts_Head_To_NASA_For_Training_999.html), last accessed: 4 April 2024.

succeeded in the training and was sent to the International Space Station (ISS) as part of the Angkasawan program for the Malaysian National Space Agency (MNSA) and the Russian Federal Space Agency (Roscosmos). The mission was a success and Sheikh Muszaphar became the first Malaysian national to travel to space.<sup>29</sup> In 2016, Malaysia recognised Russia's strength in the military and aerospace sector by seeking the help of Moscow in the expansion of their domestic sectors. In 2018, Russia set a branch office of the Russian Centre of Science and Culture (RCSC) in Kota Kinabalu (the capital of Malaysia's Sabah state) to expand the existing co-operation between Malaysia and Russia in the spheres of economy, science, and culture.<sup>30</sup>

29. Baldwin, C. (2007), 'First Malaysian astronaut returns to hero's welcome', *Reuters*, 21 October. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL21538719/>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.

30. Daily Express (2018), 'Russians set up branch in KK', 22 February. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180223060708/http://dailyexpress.com.my/news.cfm?NewsID=122968>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.



## 4. Trade and Investment

One of the Commonwealth's main areas of activity is 'trade and economy' - spreading wealth and prosperity through trading activities and mutual investment partnerships).

The Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda for Trade and Investment (CCA), established at the 2018 CHOGM in the UK, is designed to be a platform for countries to exchange best practice and experiences in furtherance of trade & investment and to undertake domestic reforms through digitalisation. The Commonwealth Secretariat seeks to create better trading opportunities for its member countries – especially those which are lesser-developed. There are Commonwealth-led funds such as “The Small States Trade Finance Facility” which aims to help smaller member countries to import goods at competitive prices.<sup>31</sup> The fund guarantees loans made by loan providers like local banks, to encourage them to loan money to small and medium businesses. Along with Commonwealth experts designated to assist member countries with improving their global trade competitiveness (focusing on developing their export capabilities), the “Hubs and Spokes” programme sends trade advisors to government ministries and economic organisations to help boost trade in the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of countries. Local trade advisers (the ‘spokes’) are sent to help national government trade ministries, with regional trade advisers (the ‘hubs’) sent to help major regional organisations.<sup>32</sup>

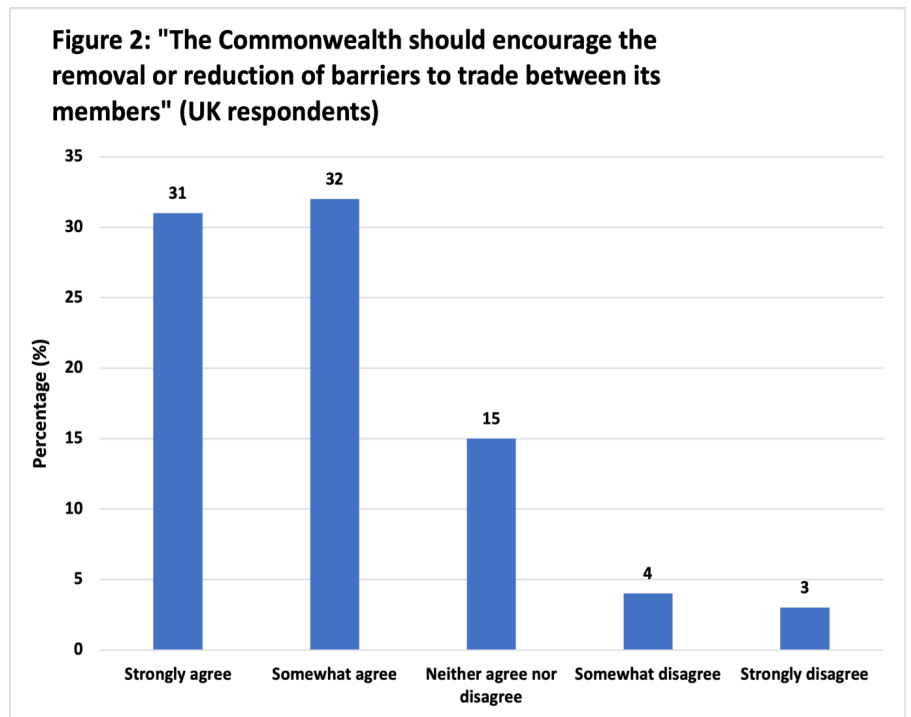
The centrality of India – one of the largest economies in the world and represents three-fifths of the Commonwealth's entire population – in the context of bolstering trade and investment relationships within the association cannot be underestimated. While it would be exceptionally difficult – neigh on impossible – to create a truly cohesive economic association of 56 member countries which are at differing levels of industrial development, there is an opportunity for the Commonwealth to act as a ‘co-ordinating’ forum which can foster new partnerships and alliances within the association. This could be in the form of tripartite, inter-continental, trading relationships within the Commonwealth that can make a genuine impact in the global economic system – one example being the UK, Nigeria, and India. There are also practical forms of action which can produce meaningful gains from the deepening of trade and investment relations across the Commonwealth – such as the liberalisation of visa systems for established businesspeople (individuals with a strong record of sound investments) who wish to travel between Commonwealth member countries for economic reasons.

31. The Commonwealth (2018), 'Commonwealth Trade Finance Facility to begin work', 8 October. Available at: <https://thecommonwealth.org/news/commonwealth-trade-finance-facility-begin-work>, last accessed: 27 September 2024.

32. The Commonwealth, 'Hubs and Spokes trade programme'. Available at: <https://thecommonwealth.org/our-work/hub-and-spokes-trade-programme>, last accessed: 27 September 2024.

The survey polling – as shown at the end of Section 2 – strongly suggests that across the different national markets, the advantage of trading with other Commonwealth member countries is viewed as a major benefit of belonging to the association. This is especially the case in Nigeria, a relatively youthful country with a population of nearly 230 million that is looking to diversify its traditionally crude oil-dependent economy by building up its manufacturing, mining, and agricultural sectors.<sup>33</sup> Due to a shared official language, parity of legal systems, and familiar administrative frameworks, the ‘Commonwealth advantage’ reduces bilateral trading costs by a fifth on average, with investment being 27% higher between Commonwealth member countries than for other country pairings.<sup>34</sup> Some of the economically fastest-growing cities in the global economy are within relatively youthful national populations which form part of the Commonwealth: such as New Delhi and Bangalore (India), Dhaka (Bangladesh), Lahore (Pakistan), and Lagos (Nigeria).

Additional survey results show that there is a strong appetite across the publics of the UK, India, Australia, Nigeria, and Malaysia for the Commonwealth of Nations to renew and deepen its commitment to facilitate greater trade activities between its member countries through the removal or reduction of protectionist barriers – building on the existing trading advantages which exist within the Commonwealth based on linguistic, legal, and administrative commonalities. This is very much in keeping with Britain’s classically liberal traditions when it comes to the free flow of goods and international commerce, as well as demonstrating the enthusiasm among aspirational industrialising member states for closer trading and investment ties within the Commonwealth.



33. Emediegwu, L., & Okeke, A. (2017), 'Dependence on oil: What do statistics from Nigeria show?', *Journal of Economics and Allied Research*, 2(1), 110-125. Available at: [https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/portal-files/portal/92683580/Dependency\\_on\\_Oil.pdf](https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/portal-files/portal/92683580/Dependency_on_Oil.pdf), last accessed: 27 September 2024.

34. The Commonwealth (2022), 'Commonwealth Secretary-General attends WTO Ministerial Conference in Geneva', 13 June. Available at: <https://thecommonwealth.org/news/commonwealth-secretary-general-at-tends-wto-ministerial-conference-geneva>, last accessed: 9 October 2024.

**Figure 2** presents the survey results after UK respondents were asked the following: “Do you agree/disagree with the following statement: “The Commonwealth should encourage the removal or reduction of barriers to trade between its members”.

More than three in five UK respondents agreed with the view that the Commonwealth should encourage the removal or reduction of barriers to trade between its member countries. While 31% strongly agreed with this perspective, a further 32% somewhat agreed – providing an overall figure of 63%. Fifteen per cent of the UK respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with this view. Only seven per cent of the UK respondents disagreed that the Commonwealth should encourage the removal or reduction of barriers to trade between its member countries (four per cent somewhat disagreeing, with an additional three per cent being in strong disagreement). Sixteen per cent of the UK respondents responded “don’t know” to this survey question.

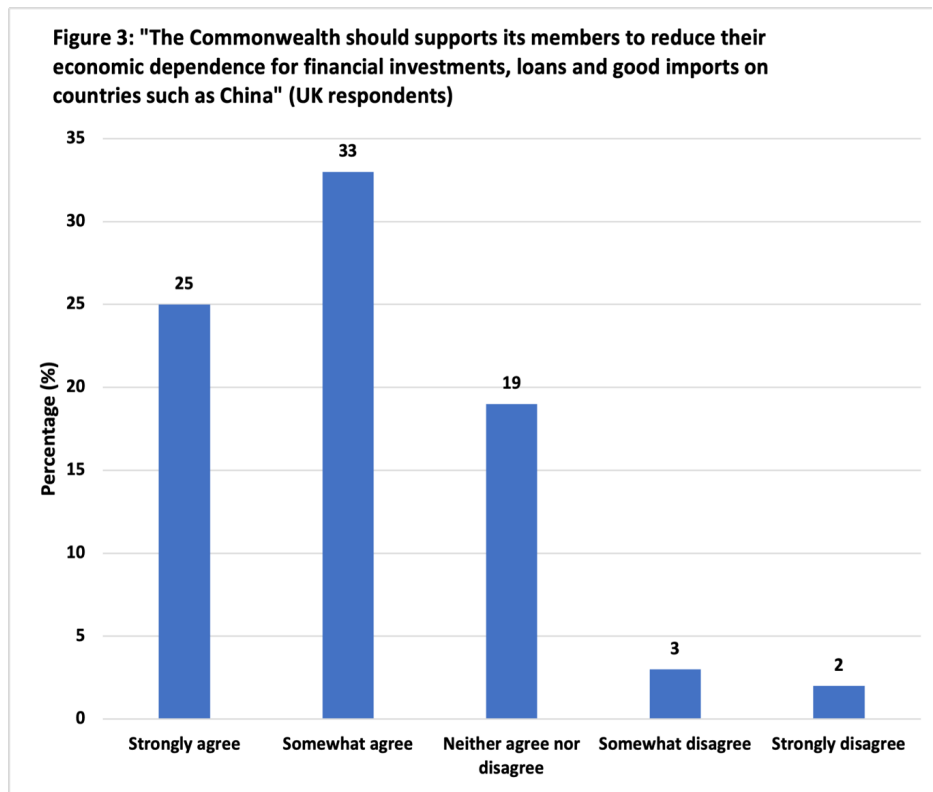
**Table 2: “Which of the following areas should the Commonwealth prioritise in terms of co-operation between members? Please select up to three options” (UK, Indian, Australian, Nigerian, and Malaysian respondents)**

	The UK	India	Australia	Nigeria	Malaysia
Trade and investment between members	28	24	28	41	41
Tackling environment/climate change	34	34	36	27	28
Tackling health problems (such as disease prevention)	31	25	28	31	25
Promotion democracy/human rights	28	32	30	41	31
Improving education	19	32	18	35	23
Co-ordination of counter-extremism/counter-terrorism	16	19	17	22	25
Increasing joint food security	16	17	19	18	15
Increasing joint energy security	14	16	12	9	15
Co-ordination of defence/military	13	16	27	13	18
Sharing of technology/cybersecurity	10	28	20	22	27

Promoting arts/ culture	7	16	6	11	12
Don't Know	21	4	10	2	5

**Table 2** presents survey results from all five national markets: the UK, India, Australia, Nigeria, and Malaysia. Respondents were asked the following: “Which of the following areas should the Commonwealth prioritise in terms of co-operation between members? Please select up to three options”.

“Trade and investment between its members” were the most popular option among Nigerian and Malaysian respondents – 41% in each market, as well as being one of the higher selected options in the UK, Indian, and Australian markets (with tackling climate change and environmental protection being the most popular across all three).



**Figure 3** presents the survey results after the UK respondents were asked the following: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? “The Commonwealth should support its members to reduce their economic dependence for financial investment, loans and goods imports on countries such as China”.

Nearly three in five UK respondents agree with the view that the Commonwealth of Nations should support its members to reduce their economic dependence for financial investment, loans, and goods imports on countries such as China (58%) – with a quarter of respondents expressing strongly agreeing with this (25%) and a further third somewhat agreeing so (33%). Nearly one in five UK respondents neither agreed nor disagreed

with this proposed strategic objective, with five per cent expressing some form of disagreement (3% somewhat disagreeing, with 2% strongly disagreeing with it). Nearly one in five UK respondents responded “don’t know” to this survey item.

## 5: Environmental Protection and Public Health

Along with ‘trade and economy’, much of the Commonwealth’s current activities are focused on environmental sustainability and climate mitigation. Member countries across the continents are facing a range of environmental problems – increasing temperatures, sea-level increases, unpredictable storm surges, drought, floods, and hurricanes. The Head of the Commonwealth, King Charles III, is a significant global voice in this area – campaigning on environmental issues for more than 50 years and being an early advocate for climate action. William, Prince of Wales, has followed in his father’s footsteps, launching the Earthshot Prize in 2020 alongside Sir David Attenborough – a global environmental award that is rewarded to five winners each year for their contributions towards environmentalism (receiving a grant of £1 million each).<sup>35</sup> Previous Commonwealth winners of the Earthshot Prize include a Bahamian project on global coral restoration and a Kenyan initiative promoting environmentally-friendly cooking by using ‘clean stoves’.<sup>36</sup>

The Commonwealth Climate Change Programme advocates for international policies, mechanisms, and rules to be more responsive to the development needs of developing small-state islands, with the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub (CCFAH) providing such states with assistance to bid for and gain increased access to climate finance.<sup>37</sup> The process is achieved through supporting the development of grant proposals and project pipelines; building human and institutional capacity; providing technical advisory services; and facilitating cross-Commonwealth cooperation and sharing of experiences and expertise by Commonwealth National Climate Finance Advisers who are deployed and embedded in relevant government ministry departments. This also operates on the “hubs-and-spokes” model outlined in the previous section on trade and investment. More broadly, the Programme strives to facilitate the human and institutional capacity development of member countries to access public and private climate funding to meet their Paris Agreement commitments, including the implementation of their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

The Commonwealth Climate Change Programme also co-ordinates innovative projects such as “CommonSensing”, which is based on a partnership between Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu and a consortium of international partners working together to support and build climate resilience and enhance decision-making, using satellite remote sensing

35. Coughlan, S. (2024), ‘Prince William says make peace with nature’, *BBC News*, 25 September. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c62rg-mrjy6eo#:~:text=%22It%20means%20change%2C%22%20the,alongside%20them%2C%22%20he%20said.,> last accessed: 10 October 2024.

36. The Earthshot Prize (All Winners & Finalists). Available at: <https://earthshotprize.org/winners-finalists-listing/>, last accessed: 10 October 2024.

37. The Commonwealth, ‘Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub’. Available at: <https://thecommonwealth.org/our-work/commonwealth-climate-finance-access-hub>, last accessed: 27 September 2024.

technology.<sup>38</sup> The Commonwealth Secretariat is the thematic lead on climate finance and is providing technical assistance to the three countries in utilising the geospatial-based CommonSensing Platform for enhanced access to climate finance. The project is supporting the three Pacific-island nations to strengthen capacity and bridge data gaps for enhanced access to climate finance, strengthened climate policy, reduced impact of natural disasters and improved risk management. One of the key objectives is enhancing food security using computational simulations based on satellite remote sensing data to map climate driven hazards and their impact on the robustness and economics of food production systems for improved decision-making processes.

The survey data presented at the end of Section 3 (on trade and investment) showed that there is considerable public support for the Commonwealth to ramp up its efforts to deepen member-state co-operation on matters of environmental protection and climate mitigation – especially among the Indian and Australian respondents polled for this report. While economic development is to be welcomed and can bring improvements in health outcomes, these gains are limited if this is not achieved through environmentally-conscious methods which take the respiratory and cardiovascular conditions into consideration. Air pollution is a serious environmental issue in India. While the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act was passed by the Parliament of India in 1981 (and later amended in 1987), it has made little headway to reduce pollution during India’s economic development (due to poor enforcement of rules). According to the World Bank, more than four in five Indian citizens live in districts which are at risk of climate-induced disasters (a threat to both the national economy, livelihoods, and food security).<sup>39</sup> This would constitute nearly half the Commonwealth’s entire population.

**Table 3** presents the survey results after Australian, Indian, Malaysian, and Nigeria respondents were asked what the Commonwealth should specifically prioritise in the future (being able to select up to three options on the list provided).

The most popular option across the four Commonwealth national markets was helping member countries to develop and implement policies which improve health outcomes (especially for their citizens living in relatively deprived and isolated rural areas) – rising to 44% among Nigerian and Malaysian respondents. It is plausible that this is somewhat connected to the impact of environmental degradation and climate change on public health security. Collating the four national surveys, three in ten respondents selected investing in research to better understand the impact of climate change on farming communities in its member countries as a specific priority for the Commonwealth in the future – peaking at 33% among Australian respondents. Nearly a quarter of respondents selected the option “encouraging greater collective action on the conservation of the environment across its member countries” – reaching 27% and 26% among Indian and Australian respondents respectively.

38. The Commonwealth, ‘The CommonSensing Project: Building Climate Resilience with Small Island Nations’. Available at: <https://production-new-commonwealth-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/migrated/inline/Commonsensing-brochure-2020.pdf>, last accessed: 27 September 2024.

39. The World Bank (2023), ‘India: Helping People Build Resilience to Climate Change’, 11 November. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/india/brief/advancing-climate-adaptation-building-resilience-to-climate-change-in-india>, last accessed: 4 April 2024.

**Table 3: Specific priorities for the Commonwealth (Australian, Indian, Nigerian, and Malaysian respondents)**

	Australia	India	Malaysia	Nigeria	TOTAL
Helping member countries to develop and implement policies which improve health outcomes – (especially for their citizens living in relatively deprived and isolated rural areas)	40%	36%	44%	44%	41%
Greater funding for educational projects and skills schemes designed to reduce youth unemployment	27%	34%	35%	49%	36%
Investing in research to better understand the impact of climate change on farming communities in its member countries	33%	31%	26%	29%	30%
Facilitating co-operation on scientific research & technological development activities between its member countries	22%	30%	33%	30%	29%
Improving the quality of economic governance in its developing member countries	22%	31%	28%	30%	28%
Greater funding to projects and schemes dedicated to countering violent extremism and radicalisation in member countries	26%	23%	23%	29%	25%



Helping member countries to strengthen relations between their different ethnic and religious communities	18%	25%	31%	25%	25%
Encouraging the removal or reduction of barriers to trade between its members	25%	23%	20%	24%	23%
Encouraging greater collective action on the conservation of the environment across its member countries	26%	27%	23%	15%	23%
Other (please specify)	1%	0%	0%	1%	0%
Not sure	8%	3%	5%	1%	4%

## 6. Education and Social Mobility

Education has long been an area that the Commonwealth of Nations has focused on and is eager to make a distinction contribution. The Commonwealth Secretariat's 'demand-driven' education programme reflects the mandates and priorities of education ministers, the values, and principles of the Commonwealth Charter and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Since 1959, Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEMs) have brought together ministers of education, officials, academics, teachers, students, and civil society groups to engage with key priority issues for education.

Through policy advocacy, technical assistance including toolkits and frameworks, and its strategic partnerships, the Commonwealth Secretariat looks to work closely with member countries and partners to strengthen education systems and policies across the Commonwealth. In its education projects and initiatives, the Secretariat looks to ensure that “all Commonwealth learners can benefit from equitable and inclusive access to quality education”.

The Commonwealth's 56 member countries have a combined population of 2.5 billion people, of which more than 60% are under 30 years of age – with much of the Commonwealth's work in the sphere of education and social mobility focusing on youth development. This is foremostly delivered through the Commonwealth Youth Programme, which has been supporting member countries for half a century. As well as supporting the effective participation of young women and men in development processes and promoting their engagement at all levels of decision-making, the Commonwealth strives to showcase the achievements of young people in driving democracy and development; to demonstrate their capabilities and inspire further action. As it stands, the Commonwealth does provide a degree of technical assistance for national and regional youth policies – aiming to feed into the creation of youth development frameworks, guidelines, and tools. Along with promoting the professionalisation of youth work by supporting youth work education and training and setting competency standards. Emphasising good employment practices, the association advocates for national and international youth worker associations.

The institutional and cultural foundations are in place for the Commonwealth to provide its work in the realm of education and social mobility with renewed impetus – with the support of national governments which preside over large populations of aspirational young people who are restless over their own educational and economic prospects. Following on

from Table 3 at the end of Section 4, there are notable levels of enthusiasm for the Commonwealth to specifically prioritise the securing of greater funding for educational projects and skills schemes designed to reduce youth employment. When collating the data for all four non-UK markets under analysis, this was the second most popular option out of all those provided to respondents – peaking at 49% for Nigerian respondents. In Table 2 of the report, when respondents were asked the general areas where the Commonwealth should increase its focus, improving educational standards ranked highly in the Nigerian and Indian markets.

This survey result is reflective of the reality that youth unemployment continues to be a critical problem in Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, which is limiting economic development, compromising social stability, and ultimately compromising national security. Nigerian youth face multiple challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and underemployment, limited educational opportunities, and health challenges. In Nigeria, and in sub-Saharan Africa more generally, many young people have low access to formal education, while school enrolment has increased across many sub-Saharan African countries, literacy rates among young people aged 15 to 24 years (estimated at 78.6%) remain relatively low.<sup>40</sup> The low literacy level of Nigerian youth has had important implications for other indices of development, particularly health. For instance, the rate of self-medication among Nigerians from low-income backgrounds is on the rise – many of this demographic fall within the youth category, working in the informal sector and/or performing menial jobs that pay below the minimum wage threshold. The inability to access affordable healthcare induces a resort to opioids as temporary “treatment” for ailments that require long-term medical attention.

The problems over the lack of educational and economic opportunities in Commonwealth countries such as India and Nigeria are reflected in the large-scale outflow of young people who migrate to parts of the western world – especially the UK. While attracting considerable numbers of international students and migrants from Commonwealth countries such as India and Nigeria can be viewed as a demonstration of the UK's internationally-respected university system and its relatively open market economy, there ought to be a mutual understanding across the Commonwealth – one that is fostered by the education-related elements of the association's structure – that nations should strive to provide their younger populations with greater educational and economic opportunities. This organisational emphasis on lifting educational standards and providing youthful population with genuine pathways to socio-economic progress, should be considered an integral part of a renewed Commonwealth agenda which better incorporates concepts of security, resilience, and stability.

40. Virk, A. et al. (2024), 'The challenge of youth unemployment in Nigeria', *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, 39(3): 1-11. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379178462\\_The\\_challenge\\_of\\_youth\\_unemployment\\_in\\_Nigeria](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379178462_The_challenge_of_youth_unemployment_in_Nigeria), last accessed: 27 September 2024.

## 7. Security and Defence

Despite being especially sensitive areas of nation-state responsibility, there is potential for greater security and defence co-operation between Commonwealth countries with mutual interests and shared concerns.

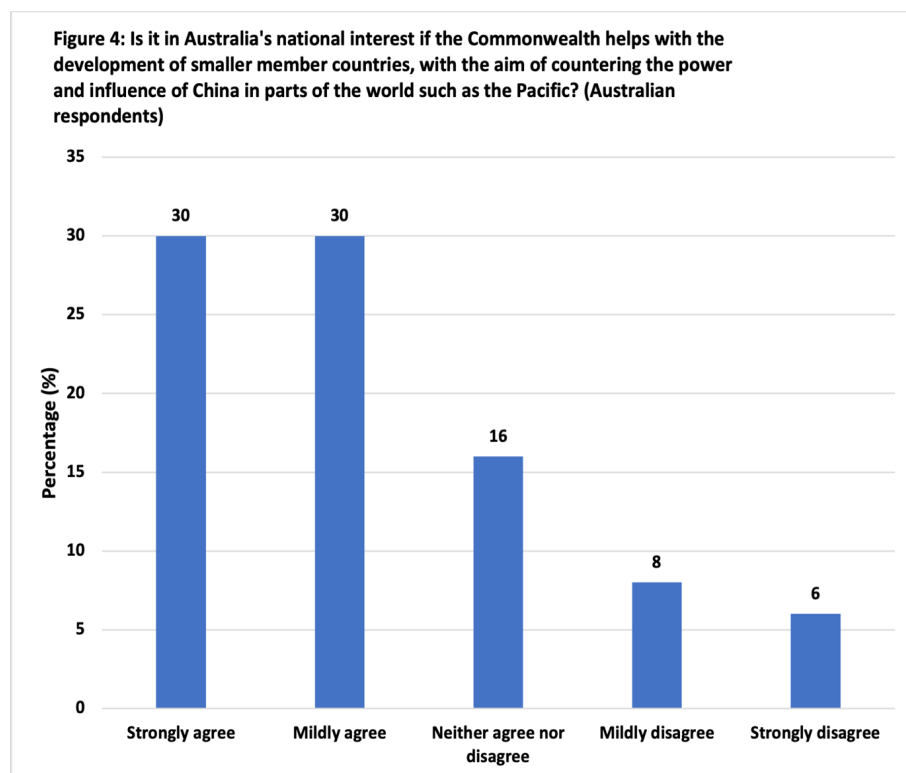
There have been cases of Commonwealth member-state co-operation to tackle Islamist insurgencies which pose a threat to human life and prosperity (recent cases include the deployment of Rwandan military personnel to assist Mozambique with fighting jihadist insurgents in the oil-rich Cabo Delgado province).<sup>41</sup> The territorial dispute between Commonwealth member country Guyana and neighbouring Venezuela over the oil-rich Essequibo region raises important questions over defence and security co-operation in the Association.<sup>42</sup> Around 16% of Guyana's population lives in the Essequibo region – with Venezuela passing a law that designates it as a new state of its own in March 2024. In addition to this, the Central American member country of Belize continues to face long-standing claims to a significant portion of its land and waters from neighbouring Guatemala.<sup>43</sup>

There are other areas of security and defence where the Commonwealth can encourage and facilitate co-operation between its member countries. With a significant number of its member countries being island states, the Commonwealth can encourage Navy and Coast Guard collaboration – including training provision, strategic co-operation over crisis management, and the sharing of maintenance efforts. It is home to advanced industrialised democracies which traditionally report high levels of public trust and confidence in the police, such as Canada.<sup>44</sup> With China striking policing agreements and dispatching law-enforcement officials to Commonwealth Pacific-island nations, the association should create opportunities for 'best practice' to be introduced into police forces through member-country co-operation. Away from traditional forms of security and defence, there is also a need for the Commonwealth – which includes African countries such as Namibia with relatively frail cybersecurity capabilities – to pool its expertise to foster a more secure association for the digital age.

The Commonwealth is an association of 'free and equal' independent and sovereign nation-states – and it is ultimately down to individual member countries to formulate and implement their own foreign policy agenda. While national governments will determine their country's positioning in relation to China and Russia in an increasingly multi-polar international system where traditional American hegemonic power is being contested, there does appear to be considerable levels of public support

41. BBC News (2021), 'Mozambique insurgency: Key port retaken from insurgents – Rwanda', 8 August. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-58138507#:~:text=Rwandan%20and%20Mozambican%20troops%20have,insurgents%20have%20not%20yet%20commented.,> last accessed: 27 September 2024.
42. Buschschlüter, V. (2023), 'Essequibo: Venezuelans back claim to Guyana-controlled oil region', *BBC News*, 4 December. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-67610200>, last accessed: 27 September 2024.
43. Romero, S. (2024), 'This Centuries-Old Border Dispute Pits an Army Against Unarmed Volunteers', *The New York Times*, 15 February. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/15/world/americas/belize-guatemala-border-dispute.html>, last accessed: 27 September 2024.
44. Statistics Canada (2023), 'Do Canadians have confidence in their public institutions?', 23 November. Available at: <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/5041-do-canadians-have-confidence-their-public-institutions>, last accessed: 27 September 2024.

within multiple Commonwealth countries to take greater collective action to be a mutually interdependent association that is able to rebalance power dynamics in the global arena: whether it is Chinese-state activities in the strategically sensitive Indo-Pacific region or countering the Kremlin's influence after its full-scale military invasion of neighbouring Ukraine.



**Figure 4** presents the survey results after Australian respondents were asked the following question: “Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “It is in Australia’s national interest that the Commonwealth focuses more on helping the economic, social, and institutional development of its smaller member countries, with the aim of countering Chinese power and influence in parts of the world such as the Pacific.”

Three in five Australian respondents agreed with the view that it is in their country’s national interest to focus more on assisting with the economic, social, and institutional development of its smaller member countries, with the aim of countering Chinese power and influence in world regions such as the Pacific (30% strongly agreeing with this view, with another 30% in mild agreement). Sixteen percent of the Australian respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with this view. Overall, 14% of the Australian respondents disagreed that it is in Australia’s national interest to work through the Commonwealth this way to counter the power and influence of China in areas such as the Pacific (including member countries such as Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Vanuatu). Twelve per cent of the Australian respondents responded “don’t know” to this survey item.

**Table 4: “Do you agree/disagree with the following statement: “Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Commonwealth should aim to limit the international influence of Russia as one of its objectives”**

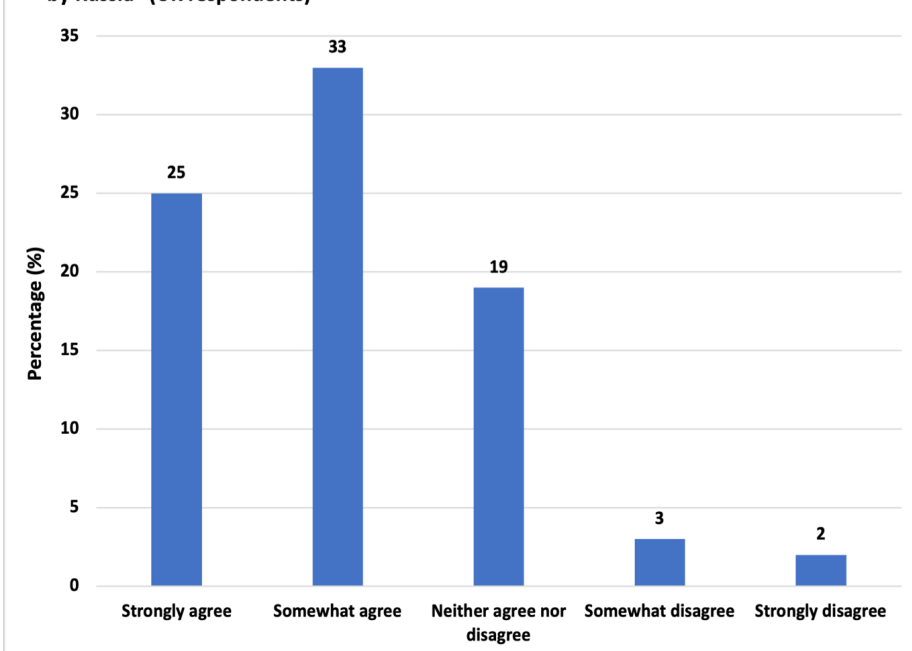
	UK	India	Australia	Nigeria	Malaysia
<b>Strongly agree</b>	37	27	41	37	20
<b>Somewhat agree</b>	28	30	25	22	23
<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	16	19	14	13	26
<b>Somewhat disagree</b>	4	10	6	11	13
<b>Strongly disagree</b>	2	9	7	12	8

Table 4 presents the survey results after respondents in the UK, India, Australia, Nigeria, and Malaysia were asked the following question: “Do you agree/disagree with the following statement: “Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Commonwealth should aim to limit the international influence of Russia as one of its objectives”.

Bar Malaysia, the majority of respondents in every national market agreed that this should be a strategic objective of the Commonwealth – with the highest overall level of agreement being among Australian respondents. Two in three Australian respondents either strongly agreed (41%) or somewhat agreed (25%) with the idea that the Commonwealth should aim to limit the international influence of Russia as one of its objectives. The UK respondents are closely behind, with 65% expressing some form of agreement with this proposed strategic objective (37% strongly agreeing with it, and a further 28% somewhat agreeing with it). Nearly three in five Nigerian respondents agree with this proposed Russia-related objective for the Commonwealth (59%), with the corresponding figure for the Indian respondents being 57%. Only 43% of Malaysian respondents agree that the Commonwealth should aim to limit the international influence of Russia.

The lowest level of disagreement with the idea of the Commonwealth aiming to limit the international influence of Russia is in the UK market – six per cent overall (four per cent somewhat disagreeing, and another two per cent being in strong disagreement). The corresponding overall levels of disagreement for the non-UK markets are the following: Australia (13%), India (19%), Malaysia (21%) and Nigeria (23%). This means the highest net agreement rating is found in the UK market (+59), with the lowest being among Malaysian respondents (+22).

**Figure 5: "Do you agree with the following statement: "Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Commonwealth should support its members to reduce their dependence on military and security investments by Russia" (UK respondents)**



**Figure 5** presents the survey results after UK respondents were asked the following question: “Do you agree/disagree with the following statement: “Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Commonwealth should support its members to reduce their dependence on military and security investments made by Russia”.

Nearly two in five UK respondents strongly agreed with the view that the Commonwealth should support its members to reduce their dependence on military and security investment made by Russia (39%), with more than a quarter somewhat agreeing with this (27%) – meaning two in three UK respondents expressed some form of agreement. Fourteen per cent of the UK respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with this proposed objective for the Commonwealth. Six per cent of the UK respondents expressed some form of disagreement (four per cent somewhat disagreeing with it, with a further two per cent strongly disagreeing).

**Table 5: Public attitudes towards the possibility of Ukraine submitting a formal application for Commonwealth membership**

	UK	India	Australia	Nigeria	Malaysia
<b>Good idea</b>	49	75	49	74	55
<b>Bad idea</b>	17	13	21	13	25
<b>Don't Know</b>	34	11	29	13	21

**Table 5** presents the survey results after respondents in the UK, India, Australia, Nigeria, and Malaysia were asked the following:

“Following the conflict with Russia, Ukraine will require opportunities to rebuild its economy and wider society.

This rebuilding process could be helped by the trade and investment opportunities that can arise by being a member of the Commonwealth. Ukraine is also an important producer of grain, which is imported in large amounts by a number of Commonwealth countries.

Do you think it is a good idea or a bad idea for the Commonwealth to invite Ukraine to submit a membership application?”

Across the five national markets, Indian respondents were the most likely to say it is a good idea for the Commonwealth to invite Ukraine to submit a membership application – exactly three in four respondents (75%). This is closely followed by Nigerian respondents, with 74% saying it is a good idea. The majority of Malaysian respondents also said it was a good idea for the Commonwealth to do so – 55%. Marginally less than half of the respondents in the UK and Australia believe that it is a good idea for the Commonwealth to invite Ukraine to apply for membership of the association – 49% in each market.

A quarter of Malaysian respondents thought that it was a bad idea for the Commonwealth to invite Ukraine to submit a membership application (25%), with more than one in five Australian respondents following suit (21%). In the UK market, around one in six respondents think this is a bad idea (17%), with this dropping to 13% among both Indian and Nigerian respondents. This means the highest net rating is among Indian respondents (+62), with the lowest being among Australian respondents (+28).



## 8. Conclusion

The report concludes that the UK should embrace a central role in spearheading reform to make the Commonwealth a more relevant, practical, and dynamic club of like-minded ‘free and equal’ nations with shared objectives, focusing on four main areas: trade and investment, climate change, education and social mobility, and security and defence. The new Labour government should make the repurposing of the Commonwealth a key pillar of British foreign policy – promoting it as a goal-oriented voluntary association based on international peace and security, fair trade, socially responsible investment, environmental sustainability, and maximising the potential of young people. This is very much aligned with the recently elected UK government’s progressive internationalist outlook. The forthcoming CHOGM in Apia, Samoa, presents a golden opportunity for the UK to articulate an ambitious vision for the Commonwealth and project a confident image of itself in the international arena.

But there is much important work to be done domestically as well as internationally for the new Labour government in terms of promoting the Commonwealth as a relevant association in the post-colonial international system. The myth that it is an outmoded and peripheral relic of British colonialism needs to be dispelled in the UK. The late Queen Elizabeth II spearheaded a remarkable transition from imperialistic control to a voluntary association of independent nations now spanning Asia, Africa, the Pacific, the Caribbean, the Americas, and Mediterranean countries such as Cyprus and Malta. While alternative models of leadership for the Commonwealth have been proposed, such as having a rotating system of elected heads of government, this report supports the view that King Charles III should remain as head of the association. His Majesty is an inclusive figurehead who has led on high-impact charitable activities across Commonwealth member countries through the King’s Trust Group he founded, as well as being a significant global voice on matters ranging from environmental sustainability to intercultural knowledge exchange.

Such is the global admiration for the UK’s success – including the British monarchy - in cultivating and consolidating healthy post-colonial ties with countries which were once part of the Empire, the Commonwealth has attracted and integrated former non-British ex-colonies into the Association – such as Mozambique (Portugal), Rwanda (Belgium), Namibia (Germany), and the recently joined west African nations of Togo and Gabon (both France). Potential future members include the likes of Suriname – a multi-ethnic and religiously-diverse former Dutch colony in South America. The richly-diverse international association which is

focused on contributing towards the fostering of a more stable, resilient, and sustainable world – one that incorporates aspirational and energetic nations which continue to hold Britain in high regard - is deserving of greater political and social recognition in the UK. The growing volatility and fragmentation which characterises the current international system requires the UK to devise an agile, dynamic, and creative approach to multilateralism - forming a constellation of international relationships which enhance both its own strategic advantage and those of like-minded nations. Although the UK has expended impressive energy on developing military-strategic partnerships in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, it must not neglect reservoirs of diplomatic goodwill and ideological convergence. The Commonwealth of Nations must not be viewed as a marginal operation and largely dismissed as a moribund organisation which is withering away at Marlborough House.

The research conducted for this report finds that the Commonwealth has the institutional and cultural springboards to catapult it to becoming a truly agile, relevant, and influential association in the global arena. What is required is a renewed sense of purpose and ambition for the Commonwealth – the aspiration to be a gold-standard technical asset that acts as an international forum of considerable partnership-making and alliance-building potential. While there must be a degree of realism over what the Commonwealth is capable of and what it can be – it will never be a truly cohesive economic association and political union which incorporates 56 member states – it can most certainly aspire to be a knowledge-rich association which specialises in providing technical expertise and an inclusive platform for similar-minded nation-states to strike common ground in areas such as trade, education, environmental health, and public security - in the name of shared benefit and mutual gain.

The Commonwealth does not currently have a vast budget, but by delivering on these fronts, it can play an integral role in helping to improve the economic, social, and environmental conditions of its member countries – bolstering its relevance in the global political economy and international civil society. If wealthier member-states can witness the Commonwealth's ability to enable positive outcomes in a select number of areas – whether that is brokering trade and investment partnerships, creating greater educational and economic opportunities for younger people, facilitating intercultural knowledge exchange, strengthening security and defence relationships, or shaping the global environmental agenda on matters such as food sustainability – then there may be a greater willingness to provide the Commonwealth with greater levels of funding in the future to scale-up such activities.

The ambitious polling carried out for this report across the UK, India, Australia, Nigeria, and Malaysia, shows that there is considerable appetite across these Commonwealth markets for deepened co-operation in the spheres of trade and investment – building on the Association's existing advantages based on English being a shared official national language,

along with the similarities between legal and administrative systems.

Importantly, a strong sense of environmental consciousness emerged from the surveys – reinforcing the need for the Commonwealth to promote forms of economic development which is sustainable and considers existing public health challenges. The polling conducted for this report also reveals that there is an appetite for improved educational and training opportunities – especially in the academically inclined and relatively youthful Indian and Nigerian markets. The Commonwealth, however, must recognise that much of this tie in with security and defence. Along with having considerable human potential (especially in terms of education and skills), it is vital for developing societies to be both secure and stable. Countries with robust national-security infrastructures and relatively high levels of sociopolitical stability are better able to attract meaningful levels of foreign direct investment (FDI).

The polling presented in this report also reveals fascinating public attitudes towards the international power and influence of China and Russia (who are both members of the UN Security Council). Public perceptions of China's international influence are likely to differ between Commonwealth countries depending on to what extent they view it as a rival competitor for international influence, the degree to which they are reliant on China-origin financial investments, and recent history of military confrontations (such as the deadly India-China skirmishes along the borders that Ladakh and Sikkim share with the Tibet Autonomous region). However, nearly three in five members of the UK public believe that the Commonwealth should support its members to reduce their economic dependence for financial investments, loans, and goods imports on countries such as China. Meanwhile, three in five Australian respondents believe that it is in their country's national interest if the Commonwealth helps with the development of smaller member countries, with the aim of countering the power and influence of China in parts of the world such as the Pacific.

There appears to be a generally stronger appetite across the five Commonwealth markets polled when it comes to the idea of the Commonwealth aiming to limit the international influence of Russia as one of its objectives – with this being relatively high in the UK and Australia, but also commanding majority public support in both India and Nigeria. Nearly three in five UK respondents also believe that following Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Commonwealth of Nations should support its members to reduce their dependence on military and security investments by Russia. An interesting finding is the level of public support for the Commonwealth to invite Ukraine to submit a membership application – something which is unlikely to be supported with enthusiasm by the Indian political establishment, but is seen as a good idea by three in four Indian respondents. While Nigeria has struck defence and military deals with Russia in recent times, it did vote for an UNGA resolution which condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine (with three in four Nigerian respondents thinking that the Commonwealth inviting

the latter to apply for membership is a good idea). These high levels of support among Indian and Nigerian citizens for the Commonwealth to invite Ukraine to submit a membership application could be significantly driven by food-security considerations - the view that if Ukraine was to become a fully-fledged member, this will help to shore up the availability and access to Ukrainian-cultivated grain, wheat, soybeans, and sunflower oil (with Indian and Nigerian cuisines being notably reliant on such products). The polling reveals there may be a bifurcation of sorts between traditional foreign-policy establishments and their relatively youthful populations on how the Commonwealth should operate in the modern international system.

While the association covers a host of world regions, it does not currently have a single member country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region – which holds considerable significance in terms of trade and security. Among its Asian members, the Commonwealth’s most western member is Pakistan, while its most northern African member country is The Gambia. The UK should be a positive voice which encourages the Commonwealth to increase its level of engagement with emerging economies in the MENA region that it personally has traditionally warm relations with. This would include Morocco and Oman, which are both geographically significant in terms of trade.

## 9. Policy Recommendations

In a multi-polar international system with ever-shifting alliances and constantly evolving dynamics, there is a golden opportunity to foster a more stable, cohesive, dynamic, and relevant Commonwealth of Nations – one that includes a UK that is striving to establish an impactful post-Brexit foreign-policy framework, as well as the largest multi-party democracy in the world in the shape of India and the most populous African country in the form of Nigeria. It also incorporates Australia – a highly-developed market economy which is also a serious security player (being part of both the AUKUS trilateral security pact [involving the United Kingdom and the United States] and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue [QUAD]). It also incorporates a swathe of relatively-youthful member countries with energetic populations which are keen for greater economic and educational opportunities – but also care about environmental sustainability (especially from a public-health perspective).

Following the research carried out for this report – including the input of Policy Exchange’s Advisory Council which was specifically created for this project, along with the findings of interviews with experts in the field – the report makes the following recommendations:

### **1. Progressive Labour government promoting modern Britain’s place in the Commonwealth**

The new Labour Government should promote the Commonwealth as a diverse but like-minded international forum for stronger co-operation on issues such as reducing poverty, supporting social enterprise, improving environmental sustainability, and protecting basic human rights - with the UK’s modern, multi-racial, outward-looking democracy playing an integral part. The current foreign secretary, David Lammy MP – born in cosmopolitan London and of Guyanese origin – is well positioned to provide a vision for the Commonwealth being an international family of free and equal nations that have the shared aim of enabling human development and young people’s progress. The UK Government should also show its support for credible, open, and fair competition by promoting the crucial work of Commonwealth Observer Groups involved in the monitoring of elections.

### **2. Promotion of the Commonwealth in the British history school curricula**

The history curriculum in British schools should be more reflective of the mainstream view across the UK (as well as prominent members of

the Commonwealth such as India and Nigeria) – that the UK, overall, has contributed more good than harm to the world. There is an educational need to dispel myths of the Commonwealth being ‘Empire 2.0’. Not only it is a diverse post-colonial association based on voluntarism and respect for national sovereignty – its welcoming and inclusive nature means it includes aspirational countries that have no historic colonial links with Britain (such as new Francophone members Togo and Gabon). Teaching of the Commonwealth should emphasise it being a modern force for good in terms of encouraging democratic participation, environmental awareness, and anti-discrimination activity. With modern Britain now home to notably-sized diasporas originating from many Commonwealth member countries, the school curriculum should celebrate figures such as Baron (Learie) Constantine, Baron (Paul) Boateng, and Baroness (Valerie) Amos.

### **3. The Commonwealth as a convening asset of technical expertise and guidance**

The reality is that the Commonwealth is not an international association which is vested with considerable financial resources. The Commonwealth should have the central objective of being a dynamic convening actor in the international system – one that prides itself on providing high-quality technical guidance. It can function as “The Connector” – an international organisation which is viewed as a ‘switchboard’ by its member-states. The Commonwealth should invest in becoming an effective ‘conduit’ between its member countries and potential sources of project funding at the likes of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

### **4. Renewed emphasis on good governance and sound regulation**

The Commonwealth should aim to establish itself as a gold-standard example of providing advice on matters of regulatory governance – especially on occupational health and safety, which remains a significant problem in a significant proportion of its member countries. The UK ranks highly in terms of workplace health and safety, meaning it can make an invaluable contribution in terms of encouraging worker-friendly environments in developing member countries – especially in industries such as construction. There are other areas where the Commonwealth can provide practical advice to improve regulatory governance (such as road safety in member countries such as Malaysia).

### **5. Establishing a new Commonwealth Trade & Investment Commission**

The Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda for Trade and Investment (CCA), should be repurposed and rebranded as a new Commonwealth Trade & Investment Commission (CTIC) – one that explores the maximisation of mutual gains through the reduction of barriers to trade within the voluntary association. The CTIC should make a conscious effort to incorporate expert views from India’s thriving business communities based in the major cities such as Mumbai in the state of Maharashtra –

multinational conglomerates such as Reliance Industries, the TATA Group, and Larsen & Toubro. Leveraging the assets of key accredited organisations is essential – especially those who provide excellent convening power for the private sector across the Commonwealth, facilitate government-business interactions, and hold activities incorporating actors beyond the association. This includes the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council (CWEIC) – a not-for-profit organisation registered in the UK.<sup>45</sup>

### **6. Encouraging intercontinental forms of ‘triangular’ economic co-operation**

There are barriers to creating a cohesive economic association across 56 member-states – diverse in terms of their stage of industrialisation, structure of national economy, and general economic needs. However, the Commonwealth can act as an international forum which facilitates the creation of intercontinental economic alliances and triangular partnerships. The Commonwealth can encourage three-nation agreements which are centred on areas such as digital finance (one example could be a UK-India-Nigeria triangular arrangement which would incorporate the major financial centres of London, Mumbai, and Lagos).

### **7. Tackling air pollution in the name of public health and sustainable economic development**

Air pollution continues to be the world’s largest environmental health threat – with this having a disproportionate impact on urban industrialising communities across the Commonwealth (especially cities in the Indian subcontinent such as New Delhi in India, Lahore in Pakistan, and Dhaka, Bangladesh). The World Bank estimates that the health damage caused by air pollution costs in the region of £6 trillion a year (equivalent to 6% of global GDP). While air pollution is considered by some to be a ‘necessary evil’ in the name of industrialisation, the Commonwealth’s official position should be that it can have a long-term negative impact on economic growth, workforce productivity, and broader human welfare. Working more closely with member countries to foster ‘greener’ models of economic developments should be a key priority for the Commonwealth.

### **8. UK-led mobilisation of private capital for green-energy transition in the Commonwealth**

The CTIC should be dedicated to building on existing trade and investment advantages to enable mutual economic gains across the Association. While efforts to bolster such relationships cut across several areas, there is a need to increase investment in green-energy transition in Commonwealth member-states. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions and mitigating climate change should be a priority for the Association, with its member facing a variety of environmental challenges. An integral part of this task will be establishing innovative ways to mobilise private capital. The UK – via The City – has world-leading expertise in this which should be leveraged.

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45. The Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council (CWEIC): <https://www.cweic.org/>

### **9. Taking the lead on the ‘blue economy’ agenda**

Along with helping to unlock financial streams for transitions to a ‘greener economy’, the Commonwealth should provide logistical support for small-state islands to access finance in order to foster sustainable ‘blue’ economies – countries, relative to their land mass, which have vast ocean resources at their disposal. Encouraging sustainable utilisation, innovation, and stewardship of oceans, there is an opportunity to build economic instruments to leverage environmental protection - such as blue carbon, blue bonds, and coastal-resilience insurance. The Maldives, a member country with a thriving ‘blue economy’ which has propelled it to an international hotspot, has set an example for its Pacific and Caribbean counterparts.

### **10. Key role for Prince William in promoting environmental issues in the Commonwealth**

Being one of the world’s most high-profile campaigners and advocates in the field, William, Prince of Wales can play a key role – as an inclusive non-political figure - in banging the drum for greater environmental protection and sustainability in the Commonwealth. Prince William is well positioned to be an effective voice on this front, launching the Earthshot Prize in 2020 alongside Sir David Attenborough – a global environmental award that is rewarded to five winners each year for their contributions towards environmentalism (receiving a grant of £1 million each). A significant proportion of victorious recipients of the grant are based in Commonwealth member countries such as India, Australia, Kenya, and the Bahamas. This Commonwealth-focused, pro-environment role for Prince William can involve expressing support for green-energy transitions across the Association and promoting its ‘blue economy’ agenda.

### **11. Developing the future leaders of the Commonwealth in line with the Charter’s values**

The Commonwealth should ensure that its educational focus is towards encouraging the development of ‘future leaders’ across the association – equipping them with the knowledge and expertise to drive political agendas in their countries of origin which are aligned with its core values as articulated in the Charter – international peace and security, good governance, human rights, free trade, respect for the rule of law, sustainable development, and environmental protection. The UK should take the lead on this front – having organisations which specialise in providing international cultural and educational opportunities such as the British Council (which also has an emphasis on strengthening English language proficiency).

### **12. Cross-Commonwealth skills development drive modelled on UK scholarships**

Building on its existing work on educational development and youth mobility, there should be a renewed drive to facilitate cross-Commonwealth



study. In the UK, the Chevening scholarships enable aspirational and gifted emerging leaders from across the world to pursue one-year master's degrees. The scholarships have an emphasis on both academic and professional development – encouraging Chevening scholars to network extensively and experience British culture. Other Commonwealth countries such as Australia, Canada, and India should create similar scholarships – driving academic excellence, professional development, and intercultural knowledge exchange through a 'family' of pro-youth mobility schemes.

### **13. Creation of a new Commonwealth Security & Defence Co-Operation Forum**

Within the Commonwealth, there should be the creation of a new 'security & defence co-operation forum' where developed member countries with highly-trained armies of strategically-aligned states offering their training services through the holding of joint exercises with lesser-developed member countries which are tackling Islamist insurgencies and located near conflict-affected territories. The UK can play its part by reinstating the Sandhurst-based officer training posts it used to offer to the Caribbean's Commonwealth Realms. The Commonwealth should encourage the holding of collective military exercises as a serious expression of solidarity with member countries that face threats to their territorial integrity from non-Commonwealth countries – such as Guyana (with its oil-rich Essequibo region being claimed by Venezuela) and Belize (with long-standing claims on Belizean territory and waters by Guatemala).

### **14. Navy and Coast Guard collaboration involving small-state islands in the Commonwealth**

Incorporating small-state island and coastal member-states (especially in the strategically sensitive Indo-Pacific region), the Commonwealth – through the proposed Security & Defence Co-Operation Forum - should facilitate and enable Navy/Coast Guard collaboration between relevant member-states in the name of building maritime security and defence bonds within the Association. This can take the shape of joint exercises which create greater training opportunities, strategic collaboration in areas such as humanitarian crisis management, and the sharing of maintenance efforts to enhance collective naval readiness. The staff training and joint exercises of the Five Powers Defence Agreements between the UK, New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia and Singapore – a cornerstone of the UK's Indo-Pacific strategy since 1971 – could serve as a partial blueprint, barring the wider security commitments the initiative entails. The UK can also offer training provision for officers from the Caribbean's Commonwealth Realms at the Britannia Royal Naval College based in Dartmouth, Devon. India and Sri Lanka can also play an integral role in deepened naval co-operation within the Commonwealth – with both being in the top ten list for largest navies in the world.

### **15. Enabling policing and law-enforcement alliances and partnerships**

The Commonwealth should strengthen its commitment to the law-and-order infrastructural development of smaller member countries. The Association should take steps to explore ways that larger industrialised nations with traditionally high levels of public trust in law-enforcement institutions (such as Canada) can assist with the training of police forces in smaller Commonwealth countries which have recently experienced significant forms of political disruption (such as Vanuatu in the Pacific region). There should be a particular focus on heightening the quality of law and order and introducing ‘best practice’ within policing institutions in member countries which China has previously struck policing agreements with (such as Fiji).

### **16. Establishing a more cyber-secure Commonwealth for the digital age**

In the more technological sphere, the Commonwealth should strive to be a hub of technical expertise and expert guidance when it comes to shaping capacity development initiatives designed to strengthen member-state cybersecurity capabilities. African Commonwealth member-states such as Namibia, Tanzania, and Cameroon are especially vulnerable to cybersecurity threats. The UK – with its sophisticated, world-class, Commonwealth-leading cybersecurity capabilities – should spearhead efforts to create a more secure association on this front, along with fellow member countries such as India (which aspires to establish itself as a digital superpower in its own right).

### **17. Broadening the Commonwealth family of nations into the MENA region**

The Commonwealth family of nations is one that spans a variety of world regions, but it should adopt a policy of ‘strategic expansion’ – looking to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region for potential new members which can add meaningful economic, cultural, and security value to the Association. While it is important that its membership does not become diluted, as it stands, the Commonwealth does not have a single member in this strategically important region of the world. The Commonwealth should increase its level of engagement with the countries such as Morocco and Oman – emerging coastal economies with major trading ports in Casablanca (which is also the former’s economic, business, and naval centre) and Salalah (which already serves Commonwealth markets in east Africa and the Indian subcontinent). However, in the spirit of unity and inclusivity, Commonwealth member countries should be consulted and agree on the formalisation of a sound mechanism for strategic expansion based on mutual consent.



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