

Modi and CHOGM 2018: Reimagining the Commonwealth

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In an apparent turnaround for Indian foreign policy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in London in April underscores a change of approach towards a forum generally considered as a non-entity in Indian strategic circles. As a rising power, India is looking at engaging in avenues where its status is recognised, especially during this period of unprecedented global structural changes. This brief examines the possible ways through which India can nurture a productive partnership with the Commonwealth.

Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in London in April, after giving the last summit at Malta in 2015 a miss, signals a change of approach towards a forum generally considered as a non-entity in Indian strategic circles. Even Modi's predecessor, Manmohan Singh, decided to absent himself from the 2011 CHOGM summit in Australia, and the 2013 one in Sri Lanka. Modi's decision to attend CHOGM 2018 against the backdrop of India's historical lack of interest in the organisation, has sent reassuring signals especially in London. It is being interpreted as a sign of India's willingness to engage constructively with the organisation at a time when it is struggling with the very question of its relevance. This may be surprising to some, as Modi has shown little interest in similar fora and has endeavoured to take Indian strategic thinking beyond such seemingly archaic platforms.^[1] Modi's willingness to attend the summit has therefore raised the pertinent question of whether India is reconsidering its orientation towards the Commonwealth.

CHOGM 2018 comes at a time when Britain is facing uncertainty following Brexit, and there is renewed interest in the Commonwealth as the country prepares to separate from the European Union. The government of Theresa May is making an effort to reconnect with its historical partners in the Commonwealth and the Anglosphere at a time when its traditional partners in Europe are renegotiating their terms of engagement with the United Kingdom. Today, as Britain searches for a new global identity in the aftermath of Brexit, there are those who believe that the Commonwealth—where one-third of the world's population in English-speaking democracies reside, spanning multiple ethnic and religious faultlines—can emerge as a significant international platform. India, one of the most important amongst the world's emerging powers, should take the lead in reimagining the future of the Commonwealth.

As a rising power, India too is looking at those avenues where its status as an emerging power is recognised during this period of unprecedented global structural changes and shifts in balance-of-power equations. The Commonwealth of Nations (or simply, 'Commonwealth') provides India with a platform to engage with a wide array of states across the world with similar political cultures. As India grows to a US\$10-trillion economy by 2030, it needs its own arenas and platforms, especially ones where China is not a member. Modi's renewed look at the Commonwealth may well be an indication that New Delhi is eyeing the organisation as a prospective forum for its power projection. To actualise this, however, New Delhi will have to invest diplomatic capital to remould the platform according to its own strategic needs. Modi's

This brief examines the possible ways through which India can engage with the Commonwealth to have a productive partnership. It first gives a historical overview of India's association with the Commonwealth, then proceeds to discuss the issues that will be key for India to reap substantial tangible outcomes as it reimagines the future of the Commonwealth and the country's engagement with it.

Historical Overview

India is one of the founding members of the modern Commonwealth. This may be an irony, given the Commonwealth's colonial roots and independent India's firm anti-imperial convictions. Prominent Indian nationalist leaders, including Jawaharlal Nehru, firmly rejected any idea of India joining the British Commonwealth after independence. At the Lahore session of the Indian National Congress in 1940, Nehru said, "India could never be an equal member of the Commonwealth unless imperialism and all that it implies is discarded."^[ii] He said he did not "believe in reforming imperialism by entering into a partnership with (it)."^[iii] Yet, India decided to remain a part of the Commonwealth, and historians underline the role of Nehru as the prime factor in shaping India's decision to be associated with its modern avatar.^[iv] There are a few who consider Nehru's decision to join the Commonwealth as being driven by his own idealist and internationalist ideological inclinations; others believe that Nehru had more pragmatic political objectives. One of the prominent considerations in joining the Commonwealth was that it offered a platform where India could connect with other erstwhile colonies, allowing New Delhi to continue to raise its concerns regarding imperialism and racism. Nehru himself underscored this during the Constituent Assembly debates when he suggested that "we join the Commonwealth obviously because we think it is beneficial to us and to certain causes in the world that we wish to advance."^[v] Others have argued that continuing to be with the Commonwealth was a political strategy which New Delhi adopted to counter the Pakistani influence in the elite club. Muhammed Ali Jinnah, since Pakistan's nascent stage, had maintained that his country will be a part of the Commonwealth. India's refusal to be a part of it would have meant the likelihood of an "anti-India" Commonwealth that will continue to provide military assistance to Pakistan.^[vi] While the Indian rationale for joining the Commonwealth can be debated extensively, India was indeed able to influence the proceedings of the Commonwealth during its early years. Illustrative of this was the London Declaration of 1949 which in effect created the modern Commonwealth.

The London Declaration incorporated Indian concerns which Nehru had advocated before India decided to be a part of the Commonwealth. Prominent among them was India's rejection of an idea of a two-tier membership and identifying the British monarch only as the symbol of the "free association of Commonwealth countries". Further, the name "British Commonwealth" was dropped and the group adopted "Commonwealth of Nations" as its new name. It emphasised the fact that the members of the Commonwealth remained "united" and that they were "free and equal" and "freely cooperating" in pursuit of their common objectives. Only after Indian sensitivities were taken into account did India become a member of the Commonwealth. The London Declaration was thus considered a diplomatic win for India as it set a precedent in terms of India being a Republic and yet continuing to be a member of the Commonwealth as a free and equal country.^[vii] India's interest in the Commonwealth was sustained throughout the Nehru years; the prime minister attended every single meeting of the grouping during his term. After Nehru, however, India's interest in the organisation began to recede. Consequently, after the London

Declaration, India had little impact on other major Commonwealth milestones—such as the creation of the Secretariat in 1965, the Singapore Declaration of 1971, the Harare Declaration of 1991, and the setting up of the Ministerial Action Group in 1995. India hardly showed any interest in the group, underscored by the noticeable absence of its prime ministers in official meetings.^[viii]

Despite being a founding member of the organisation, it would take India almost six decades before taking the position of Secretary General in 2008. India hosted the Commonwealth Summit only once in 1983. India's presence in the organisation was thus only a little more than token. India had little operational visibility in the Commonwealth, except occasionally when it would use the forum to raise concerns regarding racism and human rights violations. Even Commonwealth as an organisation did not inspire the kind of attention it should have, mostly remaining a talk shop and only occasionally taking a firm position when a member state has manifestly failed in upholding the principles of Commonwealth.^[ix] Beyond that, the Commonwealth has largely remained of low priority in the economic and strategic considerations of not only India but most other members as well. Prime Minister Modi's decision to attend this year's summit is being dubbed as "historic" precisely as it represents a renewed Indian outlook towards the organisation. As Modi is set to increase the profile of the Commonwealth in India's strategic calculations, there are several reasons why this can be an important move.

Understanding India's Prospects

Prime Minister Modi will join heads of state from the remaining 52 member-countries of the Commonwealth in London and it is expected that India, along with the United Kingdom, will take a leading role in revamping the organisation that is grappling with questions about its relevance. India is home to 55 percent of the Commonwealth's 2.3 billion population and accounts for 26 percent of its internal trade. Therefore, its role will be crucial in revitalising the organisation. There has been a noticeable apathy in Indian outlook towards an organisation which many believe has been incapable of delivering the required results to inspire Indian interest. Modi's decision to attend the summit may well signal a change of Indian attitude towards a relatively large forum. With attempts being made at decentralising the Commonwealth structure by delegating the operational aspects of the organisation to different member states, there is scope for India to carve out a bigger role for itself and be a more influential player in the negotiations. Not surprisingly, New Delhi's new approach has generated optimism in London which is looking for post-Brexit economic and trade avenues.^[x] Britain itself is keen on India taking a leadership role in helping the organisation come out of its inertia.^[xi] There is also a possibility being pondered of a Commonwealth Secretariat being hosted in India in the future.^[xii] Considering Britain's prospective gains from a rejuvenated Commonwealth and its utility for India as a forum for its power projection, it is an opportune time for both nations to use the Commonwealth as an avenue to expand and strengthen cooperation.

Trade

One of the primary areas where India must focus on is in shaping the economic prospects of the forum; India is well aware, after all, that the Commonwealth's transcontinental membership will help India diversify its trade and economic engagements. As an economy driven by services, India can focus on trade facilitation in the sector, which will enable the swifter movement of skilled Indian workforce. It will also help India to connect with the other smaller states and link them to

its own value chains. India is already pitching for trade facilitation in the World Trade Organization (WTO) to help its services sector.^[xiii] In the Commonwealth, India can lead in ironing the fine details surrounding important trade issues and building a consensus around them, and in turn to use that consensus as a negotiating leverage at the WTO. In 2017, India hosted the inaugural India- Commonwealth Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) Trade Summit which saw the participation of almost 300 Indian firms and more than 100 businesses from across the Commonwealth.^[xiv] The summit was a success, with the delegates agreeing to identify opportunities for cooperating through initiatives including awareness building, capacity building, and exchanging experiences. SMEs are important for India as much as they are for other developing countries. India taking the lead in identifying the sector for collaboration was an indication of its willingness to invest in the Commonwealth for mutual benefits.

Diaspora

The Commonwealth can be a suitable platform for discussing the issues around visas and immigration, especially with countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia where such issues are stark. India is also looking at sharing its experience in other areas such as solar energy, digitisation, and trade and investment, as part of its wider role in the Commonwealth to complement several development-oriented and capacity-building projects in many of the Commonwealth nations from the Pacific to the Caribbean.^[xv] Commonwealth countries are also home to a majority of the Indian Diaspora. The Commonwealth, therefore, is critical in not only safeguarding the welfare and interests of these communities, but also in institutionally connecting with them and ensuring that they become part of India's growth story.

Emerging Global Concerns

The Commonwealth provides a forum where India can raise critical issues of global concern. With almost 53 nations in the forum, it can also be utilised for discussing major international issues such as global terrorism and climate change, serving as an effective arena for India to build consensus. India has been a leading voice in the call for more robust collaboration to tackle terrorism. India's draft 'Resolution on Comprehensive Convention Against International Terrorism' is still awaiting consensus in the General Assembly. India also has used other international forums to discuss the threat of international terrorism. The Commonwealth may prove to be an important channel through which India can attempt to build a consensus to develop collaborative ways in dealing with these threats. The forum can also be used to put pressure on countries such as Pakistan, whose recalcitrant attitude in dealing with homegrown terror outfits has been a major security threat not only to India but beyond, to accept the common positions on terrorism. Similarly, India has committed itself to constructively work with like-minded countries to tackle problems brought about by climate change. India's role in successfully negotiating the Paris Climate accord is well recognised by the international community. By initiating the International Solar Alliance, India is not only leading the discourse but also the efforts to deal with the problem at the operational level. The Commonwealth as a forum can also be utilised by India to project itself as leader in norm-creation and action, thereby strengthening global efforts in addressing the challenge of climate change, especially at a time when major world powers would rather distance themselves from shouldering responsibility. As an aspiring permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, it is crucial for India to use such forums to project itself as a

responsible global power ready to shoulder the burden of the world's problems. The utility of the Commonwealth for India's power projection can be effectively utilised by taking the lead on such issues.

Strategic Considerations

It is noteworthy that since the Commonwealth's inception, India has consciously and deliberately distanced itself from any strategic obligations that might arise from being part of the platform. Britain had originally expected some form of military contribution from India by its participation in a loose organisation of Commonwealth defence. India, however, consciously opted out of any such arrangement given its conviction to the ideals of "non-alignment". India has now moved substantially away from the compulsions of "non-alignment", and especially under Prime Minister Modi, India has not been hesitant in exploring the possibilities of strategic partnerships with the major powers.^[xvi] With Modi's thrust to forge deeper partnerships with major powers, there are now new possibilities to make the Commonwealth strategically relevant for India. As a rising India sheds its historical apprehensions regarding partnerships with major powers, this may well be an opportunity for India to consider the Commonwealth for broadening the scope of the platform to discuss strategic and security matters. India's willingness to try multilateral arrangements for core strategic objectives was displayed with India's approval and participation in reviving the quadrilateral arrangement involving the US, Japan, Australia and India. Earlier, India, the US and Japan regularised the Malabar Naval exercises, much to China's displeasure. India has also signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the United States that will enable both countries to use each other's bases for repair and replenishment of defence supplies. More recently, India and France signed a maritime agreement that enables both nations to use each other's naval facilities; it is a major step in their strategic partnership. The implication is clear: India is willing to step up its engagement with major powers and be recognised as a major player in the Indo-Pacific by being an integral member of the emerging security architecture. With the Commonwealth's emphasis on democracy and sovereign equality and a common concern among major countries within the forum about the rapidly shifting global balance of power, India may consider this forum for its strategic calculations. Countries such as Australia and Canada, along with Britain are likely to feature prominently in these.

The China Factor

The absence of China in the Commonwealth offers significant opportunities for India. With China's aggressive and ambitious projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), on which India and United Kingdom both share apprehensions,^[xvii] India as part of the Commonwealth can hope to provide an alternative to the seemingly imperious model of the BRI. India is already attempting to build counter-narratives as exemplified by the India-Japan joint proposal for an Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). The AAGC aims not only to enhance economic cooperation between the countries of the two continents but also to provide an alternative normative model to China's BRI. Both India and Japan have emphatically argued for "the development and use of connectivity infrastructure in an open, transparent and non-exclusive manner based on international standards and responsible debt financing practices, while ensuring respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, the rule of law, and the environment" as they have attempted to make a case for AAGC.^[xviii] The Commonwealth, which is a consultative body believing in the

principle of consensus among “equal” member states, can act as a major forum to provide an inclusive and consultative alternative. India has also lately been attempting to step up its engagement with countries in Africa and the Pacific as a component of its strategic outreach to these Indo-Pacific littoral nations. The Commonwealth can be an effective platform for furthering its strategic and economic objectives, especially in countries such as Fiji which has been on China’s radar recently.

Conclusion

The idea of reimagining the Commonwealth is at a nascent stage and the presence of countries such as Pakistan may restrict some of India’s strategic manoeuvring within the CHOGM. Yet, much will depend on the way India attempts to evolve the new dynamics within the Commonwealth. Given the history of the Commonwealth, the nature of its membership and the apparent apathy of its member-states, it may be slightly optimistic to assume that the Commonwealth will witness a complete and strategic overhaul with a single summit. However, if India is to have a meaningful association with the Commonwealth, it should begin investing in the organisation and re-shaping it to suit its interests. One of the signs of a rising power is its ability to create a favourable strategic leverage by creating new platforms and remoulding existing ones to suit its own ends. It is time for India to reimagine the future of the Commonwealth and its own role in the platform.

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Endnotes

[i] For instance, Modi had earlier skipped the NAM Summit held at Margarita, Venezuela, signalling the non-relevance of Non-alignment in contemporary Indian foreign policy.

[ii] Quoted in Y. Rafeek Ahmed, ‘India’s Membership of Commonwealth – Nehru’s Role’, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Jan. - March 1991), pp. 43-53.

[iii] Ibid

[iv] See for instance, Amitav Banerji, ‘The 1949 London declaration: Birth of the modern commonwealth’ *Commonwealth Law Bulletin*, Spring 1999.

[v] For the section of Constituent Assembly Debate regarding India’s decision to join Commonwealth, see

<https://web.archive.org/web/20131109080743/http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol8p1.htm>.

[vi] Nicholas Mansergh, 'The Commonwealth Experience: Volume II - From British to Multiracial Commonwealth', Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London- 1969, pg:147.

[vii] For details on the London Declaration 1949 and India's role, see , Amitav Banerji, 'The 1949 London declaration: Birth of the modern commonwealth' Commonwealth Law Bulletin, Spring 1999.

[viii] See, Krishnan Srinivasan, 'India and Commonwealth: A Legacy and an Opportunity', in Atish Sinha and Madhup Mohta (eds), 'Indian Foreign Policy: Challenges and Opportunities' : Foreign Service Institute, New Delhi, 2007; Pg No:217:238.

[ix] So far, Commonwealth has suspended membership of four countries- Fiji, Nigeria, Pakistan and Zimbabwe for different reasons. Zimbabwe has withdrawn permanently from the Commonwealth.

[x] For remarks by Lord Jonathan Marland, chairman of the UK-based Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council (CWEIC), see *The Economic Times*, 'India has given Commonwealth a boost: UK business chief', March 04, 2018.

[xi] Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 'India poised for bigger role in Commonwealth, to take over UK', *The Economic Times*, November 16, 2017.

[xii] Ibid

[xiii] *NDTV*, 'India Pitches For Trade Facilitation Pact At WTO Headquarters', March 22, 2017.

[xiv] For the news report, see <http://thecommonwealth.org/media/news/india-commonwealth-summit-win-win-all-involved>.

[xv] Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 'India poised for bigger role in Commonwealth, to take over UK', *The Economic Times*, November 16, 2017.

[xvi] On the evolving operationalisation of the idea 'non-alignment' see Harsh V Pant and Julie M Super, "India's 'Non-Alignment' Conundrum: A Twentieth-Century Policy in a Changing World", *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (July 2015), pp. 747–64.

[xvii] For a discussion of India's concerns pertaining to BRI, see Harsh V Pant and Ritika Passi, "India's Response to China's Belt and Road Initiative: A. Policy in Motion," *Asia Policy*, No. 24, July 2017, pp. 88-95. On British concerns, "UK flags concern, doubts over OBOR project," *The Economic Times*, February 02, 2018.

[xviii] For instance, see the MEA, "[India-Japan Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister of Japan to India](#)", September 14, 2017).