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Kishida's visit to London signals a golden era of cooperation between Britain and Japan

Japan is refreshing old alliances whilst seeking to build new ones. The UK is proving a trusted and valuable partner

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Rishi Sunak meets Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in London

The visit of the Japanese Premier, Fumio Kishida, to London this week may have looked on the surface like a routine affair – two friendly countries maintaining cordial relations. But as the newly signed agreements between the UK and Japan attest, there was real urgency and purpose to the bi-lateral discussions. This is a partnership both leaders see as vital for their future.

Japan is clearly reaching the end of its post-war pacifistic inclinations in world affairs – what used to be called the Yoshida doctrine, after the Japanese Prime Minister, Shigeru Yoshida. In 1953, he announced that Japan would rely on US armed forces for national defence, and concentrate on industrial innovation, consumer markets and domestic revival. It has been a course which served the Japanese miraculously well in their progression from the post-war reconstruction to global industrial supremacy – at least until it ran into a period of economic stagnation at the end of the last century.

Japan's purely pacifist approach to foreign affairs could not last indefinitely and it has gradually evolved over recent decades. But it was the late Shinzo Abe, tragically assassinated last July, who did the most to skilfully balance Japan's constitutional constraints with the need for adequate self-defence in an increasingly dangerous neighbourhood.

Under his eight-year premiership, Japan developed its defence capabilities without controversy, opening up weapons exports and expanding its Self-Defence Forces – now the eighth largest military in the world according to the International Institute of Strategic Studies. The recent announcement of a multibillion-pound project with

the UK (and Italy) to build the next generation of fighter aircraft can be seen as the final marker on Japan's return journey to 'normal' country status.

The upshot is that Japan is now vigorously refreshing old alliances whilst seeking to build new ones. And where better to turn than to the UK? Britain was a model for a modernising Japan in the late 19th Century, and the two were treaty allies in the early 20th, until the meteoric rise of a militant nationalist faction catapulted Japan into a war that wiser heads warned it could never win.

Now, in a different century and a vastly changed world, the two island monarchies share many of the same problems. More than that they share a high degree of mutual trust, something in sadly short supply between nations these days. Here on this side of the globe, the immediate preoccupation is with a violent Russia, bent on conquering Ukraine. In the Pacific rim, the next world crisis is brewing, with China's aggressive and impatient leader deploying similar arguments to pursue an 'historic mission' of uniting Taiwan with the mainland. On top of this, an increasingly dangerous North Korea continues to launch ever-longer range missiles over Japan, posing unquestionable danger to its 125 million people.

Clearly, the foundations for deeper cooperation between Japan and the UK on more fronts are there. Defence and intelligence collaborations have been growing strongly. From the start, Japan has taken the same forthright stance as the UK over Russia's atrocities in Ukraine. On sustainability, Japan is dedicated to becoming a hydrogen economy, which the UK will almost certainly need to do, and faster than currently envisaged. On nuclear energy, our situations are different – Japan's is a question of how fast to re-open existing power plants, ours is how fast to build new ones. But where new cooperation could yield invaluable breakthroughs is on the next generation of smaller reactors (SMRs).

The Japanese economy seems to have come through both the pandemic and the energy price explosion rather better than we have – they are, after all, the world's third biggest industrial power. And closer to home, they have managed the challenges of an ageing society with a skill that warrants study.

But perhaps there is a still deeper reason why our two nations should work in greater harmony and face the future in lockstep. While the world's two great hegemonic powers, China and America, glare at each other, jostling for spheres of influence, the reality is that most nations the world over would prefer a certain degree of independence, taking what is on offer from either camp whilst keeping their pride and freedom to manoeuvre intact.

Both we and Japan can offer safe and supportive relations to these sensible aspirations – in the British case not least through using our links with like-minded Commonwealth countries (covering almost a third of the world population) in a sensible and creative way – although regrettably this has not been a prominent feature of British foreign policy strategy of late.

As Prime Ministers Sunak and Kishida concluded the visit on Wednesday, they further cemented the UK-Japan partnership by signing the 'historic' Reciprocal Access Agreement, a new defence arrangement that will allow both countries to deploy forces on each other's soil. It is Japan's first such agreement with a European state and only its third globally. In practice, it will allow much larger and more complex joint military exercises and deployments. Along with the AUKUS nuclear

submarine partnership and the next-generation fighter collaboration, this new agreement with Japan gives real substance to the UK's Indo-Pacific ambitions. As both countries face no shortage of challenges on the horizon, these ever-closer ties and cooperation should serve both well.

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