

the japan times

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U.K.-Japan relations grow stronger amid these trying times

Nations need friends the most during tumultuous geopolitical times

This has been a terrible year for the United Kingdom.

Of course, the word “terrible” is relative. Conditions for people in, say, Ukraine, Syria, a starving Somalia, a flooded Pakistan or an anarchic Haiti and a host of other trouble spots have been infinitely worse than anything experienced or imagined in Northern Europe and/or in Britain in 2022.

So the “terribleness” is strictly in comparison with what the British have been used to in the past — but seen that way, it still makes for a very unhappy list.

Political and financial instability come at the top of the current British problem agenda in a land that is supposed to be “of settled government,” as the 19th-century poet Lord Tennyson put it.

But 2022, was also the year in which the British lost a much-loved queen, Elizabeth II, at a time when inflation rose to heights not seen for 40 years and threats of an actual break-up of the country persisted. It was a year, too, that has drawn to a close with the country convulsed by strikes seeking more pay all across the public sector, with unprecedented work stoppages by nurses from the National Health Service, along with ambulance drivers, train drivers, border control officers and a host of others — reminiscent of the worst industrial and social upheavals of the past.

Brexit, too, has continued to haunt the scene with ugly tensions in Northern Ireland and still unsettled trading terms with the European

Union — a deeply complex situation that receives no sympathy from U.S. President Joe Biden.

The sinister leader in Moscow, Vladimir Putin, talks of being at war with NATO and using nuclear weapons. Hostile submarines lurk in the seas round the British Isles, threatening to cut cables and power interconnectors, and putting the U.K. at risk of a sort of wartime siege. Food shortages threaten as avian flu strikes widely and, yes, England lost to France in the World Cup, as its hero scorer botched a free kick.

Meanwhile prime ministers have come and gone with bewildering rapidity, leaving business feeling uncertain and fretful. And even now, with a third prime ministerial incumbent in two months in place, Rishi Sunak, there is unease about many key issues coupled with a government team that still fumbles their best arguments and have very much failed to convey the deep seriousness, almost like during wartime, of the situation.

At times like these, a nation needs friends and here there is one ray of sunshine. The relationship with one friend, Japan, has taken big leaps forward in 2022. This is not just a matter of increased intelligence sharing, a signed trade deal or a shared revulsion with Britain toward the atrocities in Ukraine. A recent eye-catching item has also been the decision by Japan and the U.K., along with Italy, to collaborate in building the next generation Tempest fighter jet — a truly colossal defense and aerospace project.

Of course, it will be said that Japan-U.K. relations have been close all along since the mid-20th century. But it is hard to resist feeling that this latest evidence of intimate collaboration marks Japan's real return to normalcy in international affairs — in a decisive and complete way.

In this column, I have been writing for 35 years with the repeated hope that Japan would return to being a “normal country,” but always in the knowledge that this was not quite the case. Pacifism, and the understandable horror of nuclear weapons, has all along been near the surface, reflected in a reluctance to change the postwar Constitution or to plunge more fully into the resolution of global crises.

But this new deal somehow seems to be a culmination of a real and unambiguous change of direction and a return to international commitment and responsibility, with all the headaches and costs, as well as the benefits, that involves.

At the same time there is also an awful symmetry emerging between Russia's readiness to unleash its full military fury on Ukraine on the grounds that it belongs historically to the Russian motherland and the very same arguments being used by China about Taiwan.

This, too, places Japan near the front line as the next major global security crisis takes shape and also makes the value of a close partnership with the U.K., on many fronts, even more useful and reassuring for both nations.

For the moment Japan may look like the stronger partner of the duo, with an astonishingly low inflation rate that is soaring elsewhere and with a degree of political stability (unlike in the past) that eluded the U.K. in 2022.

But there are signs of other shifts in the global landscape approaching in 2023 — and they are not all bad. The autocratic leaders in three of the world's most disruptive countries are feeling the chill wind of angry populist protest unrest blowing in their faces.

In China, Xi Jinping's aggressive centralism, especially in relation to COVID-19, has slowed growth and lost the country outside friends and influence. In Russia, people are turning against Putin and his costly war. In Iran, younger people are showing, with great courage, that they have had enough of the regime's bestial cruelty and oppression.

These are all reasons why the scenery may once again be shifting on the world stage and why nations like Japan and the U.K. should be sticking as closely together as they possibly can — and as they seem to be doing.
