

COMMENTARY / WORLD

China vs. the British Commonwealth

Beijing is stepping up its influence game as London retreats

BY DAVID HOWELL
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The eastern Caribbean island of Barbados has just decided to remove the British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, as its head of state and appoint as an independent republic its own president.

A friendly ceremony recently marked the transfer and the queen sent a message of good wishes.

There is nothing very remarkable about that; it is a pathway that numerous Commonwealth countries (ex-colonies of the former British Empire) have taken. That said, it leaves the state in question still a member of the Commonwealth, of which the British queen is the head, but no longer with the status of a realm under the Crown. The Barbadians themselves will probably notice little difference.

Yet there is one aspect of the change that could have far greater global significance, reaching in its impact right into the heart of African and Asian politics — touching directly on Japan as well — and the affairs of almost every member of the 54 Commonwealth nations. That aspect can be summed up in four words, “the Chinese have arrived,” to which the critic can add four more words, “the British have departed” — or at least, from where British influence should be and used to be strong and is now weak.

In country after country, across numerous continents, Chinese interests have been negotiating deals covering trade, investments, double taxation, the extending of large loans, while also partaking in a cornucopia of infrastructure projects such as the constructing of new airports, roads, railways, ports, schools, sporting venues and government facilities.

Much of the blame for allowing this trend to grow lies with British foreign policy experts who have persistently ignored the Commonwealth network and looked elsewhere to uphold British influence — a great mistake. Now, when it is almost too late, the consequences and dangers are becoming apparent. The tiny island of Barbados (population 297,000) is just one more example of the process in action. It has taken substantial loans from the Chinese, signed a memorandum of

understanding (MOU) with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and accepted major infrastructure investment.

So far this influx of Chinese money to help poorer economies develop has been looked on fairly benignly by Britain, even though it has created tensions in some cases — especially where the Chinese have brought in their own workers and ignored local interests.

But now, suddenly, it is dawning on many that the Chinese advance is taking on a new character. Moving beyond trade and business, Chinese authorities have been offering military training on an extended scale to many Commonwealth countries. Some 5,000 places have been earmarked for training Commonwealth military personnel at Chinese command and staff colleges as part of the wide-reaching China-Africa Action plan.

Military schools supported by Chinese funds have opened in Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya. Young officers have been invited to Chinese academies to receive training and indoctrination from several of the small island states, Barbados included.

And, of course, along with the training comes equipment, defense technology and weaponry, and behind that comes growing involvement in the deepest aspects of security and defense issues in the recipient countries.

This new dimension of Chinese activity, part of it interwoven with the Belt and Road Initiative and MOUs, has sent alarm bells through military circles in the U.K. It may just possibly have awoken sleepy foreign policy experts to the fact that the Commonwealth network in the 21st century, far from being an unimportant left-over of sentiment and nostalgia from the British past, is a crucial element in ways to handle and contain the Chinese giant.

Trans-Commonwealth defense and security cooperation, it is at last beginning to be realized, now needs to be developed as a strategic element in giving substance to the hitherto rather hollow ambition of Global Britain. If Chinese penetration is to be managed and limited, then projects like the new Australia-U.K.-U.S. submarine and defense supply agreement, as well as the U.K.'s new defense cooperation agreement with Kenya, need to be built on, together with Indian maritime cooperation, Canadian shared defense arrangements and numerous other Commonwealth-linked initiatives. And, of course, resources in British military training need to be rapidly and heavily boosted to catch up with the pace being set by China.

British difficulties in focusing on the right overall approach to this new degree of Chinese penetration have been bedeviled by excessive political swings of opinion, with the mood soaring from a totally uncritical welcoming of all kinds of Chinese involvement 10 years ago to total hostility to all things Chinese today. Both approaches have lacked the clever balance and subtlety needed. They have also left behind some agonizing dilemmas, such as how to cope with deep Chinese involvement in the U.K.'s future nuclear power program.

Japan has developed rather more policy coherence, with its “four Cs” approach to China comprising military confrontation, political competition, economic coexistence and cooperation on certain global challenges. And within this framework it seems that Japan is readier than in the past to carefully expand mutual cooperation with China in various fields where it is genuinely on offer and not just a propaganda trap.

This is very different from the old Cold War ambiance, in which an impoverished Soviet Union was falling fast behind technologically. The battle ground today is being increasingly defined by these new kinds of Chinese incursions into Africa, east and west, the island states of Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and into most major Commonwealth member states.

All of which explains why Japan should follow events closely in tiny Barbados — far away though it may seem to be and unimportant though its recent change of status may appear.

There are new lessons to be learnt by the democracies here, as in very many other Commonwealth countries, on the nature of the world-wide Chinese challenge and exactly how to address it. It would be a pity to ignore them any longer.

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