CHAPTER 9

The United Kingdom and East Asia Towards 2050

Critics of the argument that British policy towards East Asia has been neo-mercantilist might contend that the examples of interventionism that I have quoted mostly pre-date the structural reforms in the British economy introduced under Margaret Thatcher from the 1980s. As a result of these, state support for companies was steadily scaled back. They might also argue that I have focused too narrowly on examples from a single company and that the book would have been more appropriately titled ‘GEC and East Asia since 1980.’ While GEC does feature extensively, that is largely a reflection of the company’s significance in the British economy for much of the period. While extensive, the coverage here of its involvement in East Asia is also far from exhaustive. Not mentioned, for example, is its controversial sale of Offshore Patrol Vessels to Brunei in 1995, of which Brunei never took delivery, or its—also controversial—bid to sell a radar system to the Philippines in the mid-1990s.¹

A detailed study of the full extent of its business activities in East Asia and the way it worked with British politicians in pursuit of these is yet to be written. In its heyday, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, GEC was the UK’s largest private sector employer and arguably the country’s most successful company, making annual profits of over £1 billion. By the early twenty-first century it had ceased to exist. But the issues raised by its pursuit of business in East Asia, especially the cosy and often unquestioning relationship it enjoyed with senior British politicians, remain pertinent, nowhere more so than in British policy towards China,
as demonstrated by George Osborne’s relationship with a few key personalities, mentioned in the previous chapter.\textsuperscript{2} Neo-mercantilism continues but is less obvious.

A further counter argument is that the scaling back of overt state support, for example through ATP, was due at least as much to the advent of the European Single Market and the introduction under it of rules governing state aid to business. As of October 2020, these rules remained a stumbling block in the negotiations between the UK and EU over their future relationship, suggesting that under prime minister Boris Johnson the British government may be contemplating a return to the interventionist policies of the pre-Thatcherite past.

The Pergau dam scandal arose precisely because of the re-introduction under Thatcher’s premiership of the Aid for Trade Provision (ATP). This project may have been exceptional in the sums involved, but it was hardly unique in the way that state aid was used to help companies win business they may not have done otherwise. One British company involved in a high profile but controversial ATP project supplying bridges to the Philippines at the turn of the millennium subsequently admitted bribing officials in at least six countries.\textsuperscript{3}

Any reduction in state intervention also reflects the changed nature of the British economy since 1980, of which GEC’s dismemberment and collapse was the most high-profile manifestation. Between then and 2018, the contribution of manufacturing to British gross domestic product (GDP) more than halved, falling to under 10%.\textsuperscript{4} Given this, it is perhaps no surprise that British officials have publicly attached importance to future free trade agreements, including any with China, covering trade in services as well as in manufactured goods. Nor is it surprising that the British financial services sector supports this strongly. But manufactured goods still comprise 42% of all British exports, meaning they should not be overlooked in the setting of overall trade policy, including towards East Asia.\textsuperscript{5}

In the 1980s British ambassadors were instructed to include in their annual reviews, and more especially in their valedictory despatches written on leaving a post at the end of their term, a ‘forward look,’ trying to predict the future for the country in question and its relations with the United Kingdom. Known as the ‘Whither Ruritania?’ section, with hindsight it is striking how often major changes were not foreseen. The downfall of the Shah of Iran came as a shock (and was in itself a reason for the introduction of the instruction), the collapse of the Iron Curtain
and of the Soviet Union were both surprises, Kim Young Sam and Lech Walesa, respectively future presidents of a democratic South Korea and democratic Poland, were earlier dismissed as ‘yesterday’s men.’ This is said not as a criticism but as a warning that diplomats are no better than anyone else at crystal-ball gazing.

With that caveat, the concerns and uncertainties set out in Chapter 1 are all too apparent. For all the periodic belligerence of the North Korean regime, the biggest worry in East Asia in the coming decades is more likely to be the conduct of the Chinese government. The North Korean threat is long-standing but is specific in its nature and has been largely contained in the near seventy years since the armistice that brought the Korean War to an end was signed. The same cannot be said of China, which has a long history of aggressive behaviour towards its neighbours, contrary to its own assertions, and which has been increasing defence spending annually at double digit levels in percentage terms since before the turn of the century. (That it nevertheless spends more on internal security than on external defence suggests the CCP is deeply uneasy about the loyalty of its own citizens.)

It is possible that China will go the way Japan did, widely expected to be the leader of the ‘Pacific century’ until brought down by a huge economic bubble and the ‘lost decade.’ Unlike Japan in 1980, however, China under Xi Jinping is an authoritarian country, whose government tolerates less and less dissent and increasingly uses nationalism in pursuit of its aims. And unlike most western countries, the UK included, China has a clear long-term strategy towards the rest of the world embracing both economic advancement and territorial expansion.

**The China Syndrome**

In the four years since the Brexit referendum of June 2016, British policy towards its European neighbours has changed radically. But the change in its policy towards China has been even more dramatic, from the ‘golden era’ to ‘Project Defend,’ from open engagement to reducing reliance on China and calling for sanctions against Chinese officials. While the ‘golden era’ always seemed more soundbite than substance, the *volte face* is dramatic for both its speed and extent. Nor is the change in sentiment confined to British opinion. Attitudes towards China in much of western Europe have also hardened.
In London, the immediate catalyst was China’s imposition on Hong Kong of a new, and wide-ranging, national security law, in continental Europe it was China’s crude use of the Covid-19 pandemic to further its own national interests. But other factors had been contributing to a growing unease, including pressure from the US government on European countries not to use equipment from China’s Huawei in their 5G networks, the sometimes aggressive behaviour of Chinese diplomats (in all probability playing to domestic audiences in China), plus lingering concerns about human rights abuses, China’s trade policy and a growing unease that far from integrating more fully into a relatively liberal global world order, China is seeking to re-shape the world order in line with its own interests.

All this, so the conventional argument seems to go, is the result of a new, more assertive Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping. But what is really new is the attitude in Europe. The last decade has seen a steady increase in provocations by China against its neighbours, be they around the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands, in the South China Sea or in the Himalayas. The contemporary concerns over its incarceration of Uighurs in Xinjiang, the imposition of the draconian national security law on Hong Kong, and an increasingly hostile attitude towards the government in Taiwan, need to be seen in this context. Those who ascribe this behaviour specifically to the Chinese Communist Party or to Xi Jinping overlook the long history of Chinese expansionism, and the extent to which the Communist Party has both tapped into and fomented the nationalist narrative in China. Much of it, notably the ‘Nine Dash Line’ in the South China Sea, the annexation of Tibet and the claim to Taiwan, are simply continuations of claims first made by Chiang Kai-shek.

Xi Jinping’s oft-repeated objective of the ‘great rejuvenation of the Chinese people,’ to be achieved by 2049, which explicitly includes the absorption of Taiwan, makes this behaviour the more worrying. (Mao Zedong’s call for Taiwan to be independent, made to the American journalist Edgar Snow, has been airbrushed out of China’s historical narrative.) But Chinese policy has been consistent, in marked contrast to the wild fluctuations in Western policy towards it. Managing Chinese assertiveness over the next twenty-five years will be the major challenge facing any country in its relations with East Asia. It will require leadership, statecraft, and above all the same sort of consistency in policy as China itself displays.
Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the USA has provided the leadership and statecraft, if not consistency, in dealing with China but there has been little of either under the Trump administration. The way the president has belittled and berated allies only makes it less likely, even while it has become more pressing. The president has been criticised by former members of his own administration for his apparent prioritisation of a trade deal over human rights concerns, although efforts to rally the support of allies over the latter also appear to have received little support.\(^\text{10}\)

At one time the UK might have attempted to rally support among allies on behalf of Washington or to try to help co-ordinate a joint US/EU approach. But the ambitions of Theresa May to do just that, which she raised at the EU Summit in Malta in early 2017, now look decidedly fanciful.\(^\text{11}\) At the time of writing, however, the alarm of many western governments at China’s imposition of a new and wide-ranging national security law on Hong Kong may turn out to be the spur to a collective, more critical and less accommodating policy towards China on the part of the G7 and other like-minded countries.\(^\text{12}\) When combined with other concerns about Chinese behaviour, it does suggest that, barring some fundamental change, the ‘golden era’ in bilateral relations is already consigned to history.

The UK cannot ignore China, however, much less East Asia. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was possible to do so for the most part, not least because under Mao Zedong China had turned its back on the world. That is no longer the case, as the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic made all too clear. As Angela Merkel has said, Europe and China are ‘partners in economic co-operation and combating climate change, but also competitors with very different political systems. Not to talk to each other would certainly be a bad idea.’ She was subsequently criticised in Germany, including by members of her own party, for not taking a tougher line. But at least she has demonstrated consistency in her dealings with the Chinese leadership, unlike many of her counterparts.\(^\text{13}\)

For the UK, the need to talk to China is, if anything, even stronger in view of its continuing obligation to support the freedoms and autonomy guaranteed to Hong Kong under the Sino-British Joint Declaration of December 1984. But talking to China does not mean acquiescing in its increasingly unacceptable behaviour, and both the EU and UK must do more to work with and support China’s neighbours, Japan, South Korea
and Taiwan especially, as countries with which they share common values of democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law.

The need for more support for Taiwan is especially pressing, faced as it is with a threat from China to its very existence, a threat which must be taken seriously in the light of China’s steady erosion of Hong Kong’s autonomy. It might not be realistic to expect either the EU or UK to provide Taiwan with hard security guarantees, but they could and should do more in terms of psychological support. The UK could end its ‘gratuitously disagreeable’ attitude of treating Taiwan’s representatives like pariahs, for example, by granting the representative offices in the UK the same status as Hong Kong’s officials in London enjoy. Doing so would not constitute diplomatic recognition so requires only a change in attitude, not in policy.

The EU, for its part, should open negotiations with Taiwan over a bilateral comprehensive investment agreement. Its excuse for not having done so before now is that it can only be done once a similar agreement with China has been signed. But not only does the prospect of this appear more remote than ever, such an approach is based on nothing stronger than the agreement under which China joined the WTO ahead of Taiwan, and Chinese lobbying in Brussels. It owes nothing to any international convention and not only would such a move be welcome to Taiwan, it would send a clear signal to China of EU frustration and unhappiness with its behaviour.

Of eight former British foreign secretaries asked about the country’s foreign policy priorities after Brexit, however, only three mentioned East Asia at all and only one, William Hague, urged the importance of a coherent strategy towards China. British policy makers also risk being woefully ignorant of how their country is really seen in East Asia post-Brexit. As one British diplomat explained, private reactions in the region to the outcome of the referendum and its aftermath encompassed ‘a spectrum from mild bemusement about Brexit to really quite serious and deep incredulity on the other end of the spectrum,’ while another has compared it to ‘the complacency and arrogance of colonial leadership,’ his hosts seeing ‘The nation they admired for stability, common sense, tolerance and realism … beset by division, obsessed with ideology, careless of the truth, its leaders apparently determined to keep on digging.’

Significantly, all but one of the ex-foreign secretaries argued that more resources would be needed, either for ‘sensible’ increases in defence spending or on expanding the overseas network of diplomatic missions,
or both, to counter the impact of Brexit. It is a striking reversal of the policy of retrenchment pursued in fits and starts for the better part of the last forty years, and far from clear that it is what the British electorate envisaged the ‘post-Brexit dividend’ to be when voting in the 2016 referendum.

When advocated in early 2019 it might have seemed credible, even reasonable. But given the massive increase in government debt as a result of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, plus government statements of intent about ‘rebuilding’ the country’s infrastructure, the prospect of significant additional money being spent on defence or diplomacy seems remote. Although at the time of writing the UK’s latest defence review, due to be published in autumn 2020, was expected to recommend a more visible British security presence in East Asia, this was likely to be more symbolic than substantive, and met at least in part by re-allocating resources from elsewhere.

An indicator of the government’s more likely intentions came with the announcement in June 2020 of its intention to merge the FCO with the Department for International Development (DfID), a clear indication of its desire to tie development aid more explicitly to its foreign policy objectives including, no doubt, helping companies win overseas contracts.

Winning such business has been central to successive British governments’ policy towards East Asia over the last four decades and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. For any government that professes to favour free trade, the future of the global trading system should therefore be a major concern. As with the rise of China, protecting the system will require leadership, patience, compromises, and skilful multilateral diplomacy. Above all, it requires an effective multilateral body to set the rules and ensure fair play by all. As with the rise of China, it is something on which the USA has traditionally taken a leading role. But under the Trump administration, the USA is not simply no longer doing so but in the eyes of many is actively undermining both the World Trade Organisation, principally through its refusal to consider any new appointments to the organisation’s appellate body, which adjudicates trade disputes, and the multilateral trading system more generally, in its pursuit of bilateral trade deals.
Isolationism or Co-operation?

An effective WTO would be very much in the UK’s interests as it starts to negotiate its own trade agreements outside the EU. Frequent mention of the organisation was made in the domestic British debate over the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement with the EU and future relations with the union. But this was almost wholly confined to debating points and rhetoric about ‘WTO rules’ and the basis on which the UK would continue to trade with the EU should it fail to reach an agreement. Discussion of the future of the WTO, or the UK’s objectives and interests in relation to that, was almost entirely absent.

In large part this lack of broader interest in the WTO simply reflects the reality of the last forty years, during which the UK’s multilateral trade policy was handled on its behalf by the European Commission. The country lacks an entire generation and more of skilled negotiators, trade lawyers and other international trade experts in its national government. The political imperative for the current government in Westminster and, in all likelihood its successor, will be the negotiating of new agreements to replace those that the EU has concluded over the years with countries such as Japan, Canada, Korea, Singapore and more. In these circumstances, even a government anxious to see a strong and effective WTO would struggle to find the skills and capacity to work with others to achieve it. Although British ministers have made repeated reference in speeches and interviews to their commitment to global free trade, the lack of accompanying statements on the role of the WTO in delivering this suggests they will be content to leave it to others to lead on the future of the organisation.

An unexpected opportunity to show leadership on this came with the unexpected decision in mid-2020 of Roberto Azevêdo, director-general of the WTO, to step down from the role. This was a chance for the government in London to test the claim advanced by one think tank that the WTO was ‘panting’ for UK leadership, especially as no candidate came forward from the EU. The government duly nominated a candidate, but one seemingly chosen on ideological grounds rather than competence or relevant experience, and who was eliminated from the contest at an early stage. It is not an auspicious beginning.

Until the government has a clear policy on the role of the WTO in international trade, there is surely much to be said for the UK simply following the EU lead and co-ordinating its position accordingly. The EU
has the skills and experience that the UK lacks in multilateral trade negotiations, it has the economic weight of the world’s largest single market, its position on the importance of the multilateral trading system is well established and it is one which the UK has consistently supported over the years. Unfortunately, the government in London seems intent on pursuing a different approach.

It would also make sense for the UK to continue to try to co-ordinate its foreign policy with its erstwhile partners, certainly for as long as US foreign policy remains so quixotic. They remain neighbours, most of them are also members of a common security pact (NATO) and they face common threats, not least from Russia. The opportunities and threats they face in East Asia are also largely the same. The UK’s position in its long and often tetchy negotiations with China in the run up to the handover of Hong Kong in 1997 was strengthened considerably by the support it received from its EU partners, on matters such as visa free travel to Europe by Hong Kong passport holders, for example. The UK and France have co-operated together before, as in Libya in 2011, albeit with mixed success. Even as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the UK will struggle to achieve influence on its own.

But the prospect of the UK working with its neighbours seems sadly remote, at least in the short term. Jean-Claude Juncker, European Commission president at the time of the referendum, ascribed the decision by British voters to ‘years of lies,’ saying that if ‘over 40 years…-explaining to your general public that European Union is stupid, that there is nothing worth, that you have to leave, that … membership is not bringing any advantages… you can’t be surprised that the day you ask people: ‘Do you want to stay or do you want to leave?’ that a too high number of British – in the case we are discussing – are expressing the view that it is better to leave.’

But perhaps the real reason lies with something more fundamental, more visceral in British attitudes and culture, expressed by Adolf Hitler when he said that ‘England [sic] had always felt itself to be an insular power. It is alien to Europe, or even hostile to Europe. It has no future in Europe.’ As evidence, one could point to the Gordon Riots of 240 years ago, protesting against the Catholic Relief Act. Substitute the rioters’ rallying cry of ‘No Popery,’ aimed firmly at perceived foreign—one more specifically European—influence, by the Brexiter’s complaint of ‘Brussels bureaucrats’ and the similarities are striking, down to the prevalence of rumours or ‘fake news’ in each case. The only difference, perhaps, was the
relative lack of violence around the Brexit referendum, despite the murder of one MP in the run-up to it, and politicians threatening disorder if the result was not implemented.\textsuperscript{22}

Another, personal, example comes from accompanying a group of visiting British MPs to a meeting with Taiwan’s president Ma Ying-jeou, following the latter’s inauguration in May 2008. In the meeting, one MP responded to Ma’s explanation of the very real threat Taiwan faced from China’s 1200 short and medium range missiles targeted on the island by claiming that Britons knew how he felt, facing as they did missiles targeted at the country from Europe. One fears there are too many others who think the same.\textsuperscript{23}

Although formal co-operation between the EU and UK over policy towards East Asia is therefore unlikely, in practice their approaches will remain similar, not least because their interests in the region remain aligned. In March 2019, while the UK was still a member, the European Council held its first summit meeting in thirty years focused specifically on China. The motivating factors were related more to trade matters than to security or human rights, with industrial policy, cyber security and trade and investment policy topping the agenda. But the change in tone and language was striking, with the Council endorsing a strategy paper labelling China a ‘systemic rival.’\textsuperscript{24}

Twelve months later, one commentator argued that matters had gone further, with a ‘paradigm shift’ in relations between the EU and China beginning to take place and the EU having abandoned its previous ambition for a closer, more integrated relationship.\textsuperscript{25} Although the catalyst for this was the Covid-19 pandemic and more specifically China’s response, the increasingly authoritarian and nationalistic conduct of China under Xi Jinping were seen as the principal underlying causes. While there can be little doubt that growing Chinese assertiveness is driving growing ‘push-back’ in Europe, it remains to be seen whether this view will be sustained. The EU has long struggled to develop, let alone sustain, a coherent foreign policy approach but as opportunities for European companies to win big orders in China diminish, or promised Chinese investment in Europe is seen to come with unwelcome terms attached, so a more coherent approach may develop.

Another driver of the increasingly wary European attitude towards China has been the growing trade war between the USA and China and fears of ‘becoming roadkill in a Sino-American game of chicken.’\textsuperscript{26} This is a worry that the EU shares with China’s neighbours and one might expect to see both the EU and UK at least exchange views with them more frequently on this and related challenges in the years ahead.
A Leadership Role for Japan?

Of the former British foreign secretaries referred to above, however, only two so much as mentioned Japan in the context of the UK’s post-Brexit foreign policy, despite its importance as a fellow member of the G7, a country like the UK benefiting from American security guarantees, and a country whose investment in the UK economy has been so important for British jobs and prosperity.

It is hard to imagine Japan receiving so little attention in the 1980s, or to conceive of Margaret Thatcher postponing a visit to Tokyo because the Chinese were not willing to agree a visit to Beijing as part of the same trip, in the way that David Cameron did in early 2012. But it also seems strange now to read of Japan ‘maintaining its close alliance with the United States, solidifying the new China relationship, and looking ahead to a growing triangular alliance with Washington and Peking.’

Japan’s ‘lost decade’ of economic stagnation after the collapse of the asset price bubble in 1991 was compounded by a succession of weak governments, changing trade patterns, due in part to the rise of the Yen after the Plaza Agreement of 1985, and historical ‘baggage’ in its relations with its neighbours, principally Korea and China, whose leaders lose little opportunity to exploit it for their own domestic advantage. Over the last three decades these forces have combined to make Japan’s influence today seem a far cry from what it was in the 1980s. It struggled to respond to the rise of Chinese influence within the region, seeming to sit on the sidelines and sulk while this happened, perhaps in part because it did not know how best to respond to the rise of interest in China in both Washington and European capitals.

But Japan is still the world’s third biggest economy; more importantly, in marked contrast to China, it shares the same values the UK and EU profess to and considers itself as one of the three key pillars of the Western Alliance. This makes the relative lack of attention paid to it by the UK the more remarkable, especially as Britain has benefited so much from Japanese inward investment since the mid-1980s. In 2015, foreign direct investment in the UK from Japan was more than twenty times that from China, yet the importance of this for the British economy scarcely featured in the debate and referendum over EU membership the following year. Japanese companies have invested in the UK economy on an unprecedented scale since the advent of the Single Market in 1986, now accounting for almost 5% of all jobs in the UK manufacturing sector.
alone. More than 50% of all Japanese investment in the EU is based in the UK, the bulk of it there to take advantage of the Single Market.

Furthermore, while British politicians were still wrangling over the future of the country’s relationship with the EU, East Asian countries were already being forced to adapt to the new realities emanating from Washington. Half a year after the Brexit referendum, they had to start adjusting to the policies of Donald Trump as US president, including his conviction that ‘trade wars are good, and easy to win.’ While China would bear the brunt of the impact of his views over the next three years, as the two countries engaged in a series of skirmishes involving tariffs and counter-tariffs, the immediate consequences affected Japan most directly, one of Trump’s first acts after inauguration being to withdraw the USA from the fledgling Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement. More than this, the very global order on which Japan had built its post 2nd World War policies, security relationships and diplomacy was under threat. An increasingly nationalistic and assertive China under Xi Jinping only added to the uncertainty.

But far from turning inward on itself in reaction to the twin shocks of the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump’s ‘America First’ policy, under prime minister Shinzo Abe, Japan has shown leadership on a scale hitherto unprecedented since 1945, by successfully resurrecting the TPP agreement and re-branding it as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)—a TPP minus the USA in effect.

Intriguingly, Abe has also said that post-Brexit Britain would be welcome ‘with open arms’ to join the CPTPP. While the proposal appealed to Brexiter with their vision of a ‘Global Britain’ it seems fanciful, not least because geography, combined with the relatively small size of most of the 11 CPTPP members’ economies, means that it would never be a substitute for the EU market for UK businesses. But Abe has since signalled that Japan’s bilateral free trade agreement with the EU could also be aligned with the CPTPP. If this happened, and if Britain also joined the CPTPP, this would place Japan at the centre of what would be the world’s largest free trade area and the UK would be a member, Brexit notwithstanding.

Japan and the UK subsequently failed to agree a bilateral ‘cut and paste’ free trade agreement that, post-Brexit, would have preserved the access to the Japanese market that British companies enjoyed under the bilateral agreement between Japan and the EU. This suggested that
British membership of the CPTPP will be far from automatic.\(^{31}\) (A bilateral deal in principle was reached in September 2020). But the UK’s international trade secretary met ambassadors from the CPTPP member countries in early July 2020 in a clear indication of the British government’s interest in pursuing CPTPP membership, although concluding any agreement was expected to take several years.\(^{32}\) Abe’s suggestion could therefore be the keystone of both the EU’s and UK’s relations with East Asia after Brexit.

Much will depend on what, if any, broader objectives there may be for CPTPP membership. Japan’s sudden enthusiasm for combining the separate agreements certainly deserves scrutiny. It may be motivated by a desire to protect the multilateral trading system in the face of a protectionist American president who appears to have an antipathy to multilateral agreements generally. Working with the EU and other like-minded countries, such as Canada, to protect the system and preserve the WTO is to be welcomed. It is probably also a defensive move, in reaction to Japan’s economic rivals, notably Korea, signing bilateral FTAs. Japanese firms faced being placed at a significant disadvantage if Japan had not also entered into bilateral agreements with its main trading partners.

But neither South Korea nor Taiwan are currently members of the CPTPP and if the EU and UK are to consider seriously the Japanese proposal, they should push for membership for both. This is not just because both are important trading partners, whose inclusion in the broader agreement would be positive for both trade and growth. South Korea and Japan face common threats, from both China and North Korea. It is in their own interests to work together more but their own relationship is beset by rivalry and mistrust, fuelled by nationalist tensions in both. Excluding South Korea from such a trading bloc would only add fuel to these tensions, while bringing in Taiwan would help reduce its international isolation. Perhaps most fundamentally, the EU and UK share common values with all three.

Collaborating in this way would also be an effective way of responding to the rise of Chinese assertiveness under Xi Jinping. Possible future membership of the bloc for China could, indeed should, be left open, provided it shows itself willing to adhere fully to the obligations of membership.

While Brexiteers might welcome the idea of the UK joining the CPTPP, assuming agreement can be reached on the terms, a question that has not
so far been addressed is whether membership of the group might bring with it accompanying expectations in terms of security. Before resigning as prime minister in 2020, Shinzo Abe made clear his determination to maintain, and even increase, security co-operation with the USA, despite difficulties over trade policy. Japan would almost certainly welcome similar co-operation, albeit on a much smaller scale, with the UK.

The two countries agreed a three-year defence co-operation plan in 2017 and in late June 2020, the Ministry of Defence in London announced the permanent deployment of Royal Marines ‘east of Suez’ as part of a new ‘persistent global presence.’ The scale is modest: two Royal Navy frigates visited Japan in 2018 and 45 army personnel visited for joint training, while the marine deployment will be numbered in hundreds. Nevertheless, the deployment marks a significant change to five decades of withdrawing from global commitments. Further measures are also possible, such as more frequent Freedom of Navigation Operations (‘FONOPs’) by Royal Navy ships in the South China Sea.

While the new presence may be largely symbolic, the symbolism will still be welcomed by Japan and most of its neighbours, especially as the emphasis of the deployments will be on working with allied countries. Nor will the message be lost on China. Such measures will also appeal to politicians in London with their post-EU vision of a ‘Global Britain.’ But even a modest increase in activities will require a significant commitment of resources far from home, and a careful balancing act given the tensions and disputes within the region. The big question, and the most important one, is whether these will be sustained as long term commitments or whether the resources will be withdrawn after a few years, especially once the full long-term cost of responding to the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic becomes clear. For the biggest constraint on such ambitions is the inability or unwillingness of British politicians to make long term commitments, the more so given other demands on limited resources.

In this respect, the UK’s future position bears comparison with that of Canada. As a fellow member of the G7, G20, NATO and the Commonwealth, Canada is not without influence on the global stage. But it is only a fraction of the influence the EU brings to bear, an influence that until now the UK has played a major part in shaping, almost always to its own advantage. As with Canada and the case of Meng Wanzhou, outside the EU, from a position of influencing global policy, the UK risks becoming not only a rule taker rather than rule maker but a pawn in other countries’ fights. The way in which policy on the use of Huawei equipment
changed so radically in a matter of months in the first half of 2020 was a possible early indication of that.

The UK can build a new relationship with the countries of East Asia. Given their growing importance economically and politically it should certainly make doing so a priority. But if it is to do so successfully, Britain’s leaders, policy makers and businesses need to cast aside old-fashioned stereotypes and patronising assumptions or ‘superior wisdom.’ They can no longer afford to take countries in the region for granted and need to move beyond relations built on fatuous soundbites such as the ‘golden era,’ that was already looking decidedly tarnished almost as soon as David Cameron and George Osborne, its principal proponents on the UK side, had left office.

Instead, they should seek to build lasting relationships based on shared values, mutual respect and understanding and a willingness to learn. It will require engaging in patient negotiations, in consensus-building and in multilateral diplomacy; it will also require commitment, perseverance and energy. Britain’s politicians will have to be more willing to travel, to listen more and preach less, and engage in sometimes difficult negotiations if they wish to wield influence on the world stage after Brexit. Whether this will be forthcoming remains to be seen.

It is tempting at present to be pessimistic about the future. The resurgence of nationalism is rekindling old tensions, not least in East Asia. Frustrations at growing divisions in society since the 2008 global financial crisis have fuelled an angry populism that has helped produce new leaders, full of rhetoric but so far lacking in effective action for tackling the problems and challenges the world faces. Brexit was but one manifestation of this, another was the lack of a collective response to deal with the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic. The failure, so far, to agree an effective collective strategy for tackling global warming is another.

Faced with such problems, it is easy to overlook the enormous progress that has been made in East Asia over the last four decades, in reducing poverty, improved health and access to education, in bringing unprecedented, broadly based prosperity, in greater security and more. I have been privileged to have experienced so much of it. The region faces major challenges but it would be foolish to assume that it cannot rise to them, and even more foolish for the UK and EU not to continue to work with the countries of the region in building a better future.
Notes

1. *GEC-Marconi Denies Radar Cancellation*, Flight Global, 13 December 1995, https://www.flightglobal.com/gec-marconi-denies-radar-cancellation/1352, retrieved 22 July 2020.

2. Jim Pickard: George Osborne’s Four Lords Push for Stronger UK-China Ties, *Financial Times*, 21 October 2015, op.cit.

3. British Family Firm Accused of Getting Rich by Building Bridges to Nowhere, *The Guardian*, 20 December 2005, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/dec/20/uk.freedomofinformation; Bridge Builder Fined For Bribe, *Financial Times*, 25 September 2009, https://www.ft.com/content/62751218-aa05-11de-a3ce-00144feabdc0, both retrieved 29 June 2020.

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