

Delivered 19.01.2023

I express gratitude for the courtesies extended during my recent all-India visit, which addressed political, economic, cultural, social and educational considerations. It included the uplifting experience of visiting Shanti Bhavan, a school outside Bangalore for economic and disadvantaged children who share the founding father's vision of contributing opportunity to the economic well-being of their families, and who will be the future of a free and independent powerhouse country of India through willingness, courteousness and profound visible gratitude.

India is of profound importance to the United Kingdom and commands attention; however, we should not take positive relations for granted. She is a critical link in much-needed, global, diverse supply chains, for example, and, having spoken at some length already in your Lordships' House on the free trade agreement negotiations, I only add to them by commending the pragmatic approach of Secretary of State Badenoch for stepping back from a rushed conclusion to the FTA and taking the necessary time to settle this complex negotiation, which will stand the test of time and be of long-term benefit to both our countries.

I too join the noble Baroness, Lady Verma, in not understanding the rationale as to why the Prime Minister has appointed no trade envoys to India—and not just one, but four, to reflect India's diversity. India is on the climb: with 50% of the population under 25, with its IT advancing rapidly and with opportunity for closer partnerships, it is set to become the world's third-largest economy by 2050. Thus it is imperative that the UK forges an even closer and more strategically enhanced relationship. The gap sometimes between perception and reality and pressing home comparative advantage is a challenge to overcome. At the least, we must be in lockstep with others around the world who sense opportunity. Confidence among UK SMEs is taking a knock, so unlocking opportunity would be welcomed.

The UK must evolve, and better use should be made of mainstream parliamentarians, who are an asset; they should be involved as a channel to deepen relations. I am delighted that the upcoming initiative of the noble Lord, Lord Howell, as president, and the noble Lord, Lord Kamall, as co-chair—neither of whom is in their place—will reinvigorate and give a commendable boost to the Commonwealth APPG. I trust that they will consider placing relationship-building high on their agenda, not just with Delhi but throughout the four quarters of India.

I move on and venture reflections of a differing nature. I recognise that trade co-operation and security activities go hand in hand. I would like to refer not to the sometimes derogatory regional rhetoric, nor the situation in the high Himalayas in relation to China, which gives cause for concern, but to the importance of encouraging India to be more central to the Indo-Pacific fold. This has been an omission thus far, so global tilt towards that region has not been fully illustrated. India, with its military prowess, has much to offer in being a practical counterbalance to China. It should also be closer to centre stage in policy terms, as it is at the centre of the China-Russia axis. We would be a more secure world if Five Eyes and the AUKUS alliance were more inclusive of regional participation.