



21st Century Group

UK-Japan 21st Century Group 41st Annual Conference, March 2025

Chair's Summary

The 41st Annual meeting of the UK-Japan 21st Century Group was held on 14-16 March at Fordham Abbey. The meeting was chaired by the Rt Hon Lord McConnell, UK Co-Chair and Mr Seiji Kihara MP, Japanese Co-Chair.

23 British and 19 Japanese participants included parliamentarians and senior representatives from business, the media, academia, think tanks and the diplomatic service from both countries.

London Programme

Call on the Deputy Prime Minister, The Rt Hon Angela Rayner MP

The Japanese participants, accompanied by Lord McConnell, called on the Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) at 10 Downing Street. The DPM spoke warmly about the UK-Japan strategic global partnership to which the British Government was fully committed at such a critical time for both countries. Given the missions at the heart of the new government, there was scope for close UK-Japan cooperation on issues including growth, green energy, security and defence, and people-to-people links. She was in favour of open dialogue as promoted by the UK-Japan 21st Century Group. Lord McConnell agreed there was much to discuss – the Group had a full agenda, and it would include considering the current global uncertainty and the way in which the UK and Japan could work together with their shared values. He hoped the DPM would consider visiting Japan soon. Mr Kihara welcomed UK leadership on Ukraine on which Japan's government was fully supportive. He said the recent 2+2 economic dialogue was an excellent example of the closer Ministerial links he hoped to see continue. He was also keen to see more collaboration on science and technology programmes. He repeated the invitation to the DPM to visit Japan, perhaps for the Osaka Expo.

Lunch at the Japanese Embassy

His Excellency Ambassador Hiroshi Suzuki kindly hosted a lunch for all participants at the Embassy on 13 March. He said the UK- Japan relationship was better than ever. He was keen to see the economic, security and people-to-people links strengthened even further. Recent visits to Japan by the Foreign and Business Secretaries for the

first economic 2+2 dialogue had also underlined close cooperation on Ukraine and joint commitment to the Indo Pacific. He valued the important intellectual exchanges of the UK-Japan 21st Century Group and its valuable practical recommendations. Lord McConnell agreed. He noted the interest amongst British parliamentarians in the Group which helped demonstrate all-party support for the UK-Japan relationship which was especially important at this time, and he thanked the Group's sponsors. Mr Kihara echoed this. He looked forward to the Group's discussions on issues of current importance, and particularly the geopolitical sessions at the weekend.

FCDO Reception

On the evening of 13 March, participants attended a reception hosted at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Baroness Chapman, FCDO Minister, spoke warmly of the strength of the UK-Japan relationship, particularly in the areas of trade and investment, science and technology, defence, and people-to-people links. She welcomed the role played by the UK-Japan 21st Century Group, particularly at times of geopolitical tension, and looked forward to receiving the conference recommendations to both Prime Ministers. Lord Coaker, Minister of State for Defence, proposed a toast to the success of the Group's discussions and spoke positively about the value of the bilateral defence and security relationship, and of close defence industry collaboration.

Fordham Abbey Conference

At the start of the conference, the Group heard a presentation from Kumiko Hashimoto on the history of the Hashimoto family's connection with Fordham Abbey and the Dojima Sake Brewery in the UK. Lord McConnell thanked the Hashimoto family for their hospitality and for providing such an impressive location for the Group's 41st conference. Looking back at earlier conference reports, the focus of discussion had changed considerably in recent years. He thanked his predecessor, Lord Lansley, for successfully chairing the Group in a positive direction. Mr. Kihara agreed. Over the last 40 years, the Group had tackled a wide range of political, economic and social issues. More recently geopolitical issues dominated. He hoped to be able to propose constructive recommendations to both Prime Ministers.

Session 1: Latest Developments in the UK and Japan - Politics and the Economy

The Group discussed political and economic developments in both the UK and Japan. In the UK, the Labour Party's victory in 2024 was less clear cut than it first appeared. We were seeing an increasing fragmentation of British politics. Whereas in the past, around 97% of voters had voted Labour or Conservative, that was no longer the case. In 2019, around 60% voted for the two main parties. Recent polls show a four-way split: 24% Labour; 22% Conservative; 23% Reform; and 24% Liberal Democrats/Green. Following the general election, the government's position was fragile, not least because of voter concerns about the economy. The Prime Minister's leadership in responding to the US handling of Ukraine and Russia had helped win back some support, though voters' main concerns remained the economy, immigration and the shortage of housing.

In Japan, the political situation was equally uncertain. The coalition of LDP and Komeito had lost the Lower House majority it had held for virtually 70 years and is facing an Upper House election in 2025. It now needed the support of at least one opposition party to pass the budget. Some opposition parties were using social media to promote a populist agenda. However, economic indicators were positive with significant increases in domestic investment, wage growth and growth in tax revenues. The government needed to focus on tackling inflation, investing in local economic development and infrastructure, and expanding Japan's export potential.

Group members debated the nature of populism in politics in the UK and Japan, and the causes of dissatisfaction linked to inflation, alienation, lack of access and economic disparity. They discussed the use by some of social media to promote populist or nationalist agendas. In both countries, trusted media sources remained necessary. But it was also important to tackle issues relevant to those feeling left behind by traditional politics.

Session 2: The Importance of Universal Healthcare in tackling Non-Communicable and Infectious Diseases

The Group heard presentations on the potential for UK-Japan collaboration in tackling global health challenges, looking at specific examples of tackling infectious disease, and the benefits of a comprehensive “One Health” approach. They also considered how such an approach might contribute to more resilient health systems in third countries and to Universal Health Coverage.

Group members discussed the potential for collaboration across different sectors and levels of society. The discussion of the multi-layered structure of global health governance, also considered how the UK and Japan could fill some of the gaps left by the withdrawal of global health funding by the new US Administration. Members suggested that global cooperation on health remained important, though new US political constraints meant bilateral and like-minded “mini-lateral” approaches could also be considered.

The Group recalled former co-chairman Keizo Takemi's proposal for a UK-Japan working group on collaboration and research into vaccine development, drug discovery, and deployment of diagnostics, surveillance, and evaluation. They also discussed the need to consider joint research and the need for enhanced clinical workforce training, and the potential for collaboration between government and industry in export and distribution strategy.

Session 3: Science and Technology Cooperation and University Partnerships

Japan's science and technology landscape is at a major turning point, driven in large part by a rapid expansion of national investment in recent years. This funding has been directed not only toward key technologies such as quantum computing, AI, fusion energy, and bioengineering but also toward universities, strengthening their role as centres for talent development following recent university reforms. A particularly groundbreaking shift is the increasing involvement of the Ministry of

Economy, Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, and the Ministry of Defence in academic funding. As investment in security-related fields grows, academia is beginning to move beyond its traditional reluctance toward dual-use technologies, signalling the start of a new era. In this context, a strengthened UK-Japan partnership has the potential to play a crucial role—not only in enhancing national security but also in driving forward collaborative research in cutting-edge science, technology and innovation.

Like Japan, the UK had also faced funding issues, although successive governments had been able to prioritise maintaining sufficient levels of funding for research and development. There were good examples of collaborative research between the UK and Japan, particularly in areas such as medicine, astrophysics and biosciences where the impact of collaborative research had been significantly higher than the global average. There were several university-led cooperation initiatives such as the RENKEI Network involving six Japanese and six British universities. Exchanges at student level, however, remained relatively modest. The UK also had campus initiatives involving regional universities working together to promote investment in research.

Participants considered several ways to improve links. They noted the difficulties, including funding for exchange. But examples of successful university exchanges were worth studying further when looking for new policy initiatives. Given the new political constraints on US funding, there were opportunities for the UK, Japan and others to promote research initiatives based on our shared values. Participants supported research collaboration in defence and space technology.

Dinner on 14 March

Over dinner at Fordham Abbey, Lord McDonald, Master of Christ's College Cambridge, and former head of HM Diplomatic Service, spoke about recent developments in the US, and the implications for the UK and Japan. It was increasingly important for the UK and Japan to work closely together on trade, the environment, and security where US policy had undergone a fundamental shift. In these, as in other areas, UK-Japan cooperation would be extremely valuable.

Session 4: Geopolitical Challenges

Group members had a detailed discussion of the new American administration and the implications and risks for both the UK and Japan of the significant changes we were seeing in US policy. It was clear that the second Trump administration would be very different from the first: more disciplined, better prepared, with ambitious goals and a team determined to achieve them. Under the new goals, it was important to distinguish between the strategic vision and the forceful tactics used to achieve it. The US would seek to distinguish between opponents, compliant partners and those with whom the relationship would become increasingly transactional. It remained possible that the President's ambitious plans could be affected by external events, but even in such circumstances we should not expect a return to the post-1945 global order we have been used to.

The Group also considered the implications for Taiwan, for Ukraine and future global relations. Currently, isolationists and restrainers in the Administration had the upper

hand, leaving the US less inclined to devote resources overseas. Whilst the Group was concerned by the use of various means short of military force by China, they agreed we should be prepared for the possibility that China might eventually use force against Taiwan.

However, some of these changes were not unprecedented. The pivot away from Europe and towards Asia had begun under the Democrats. It seemed likely that disruption to the existing world order, as a result of existing US policy, would continue beyond the current Administration. The UK and Japan should therefore coordinate their leadership on global discussions that might develop a new order. Participants noted the importance of protecting press and academic freedoms and common interests between the UK, Japan and other allies on issues such as climate and trade. Others raised their concerns regarding the effectiveness of sanctions against Russia, of which ultimately the main beneficiary was China

More generally, given significant doubts about the reliability of the US commitment to existing alliances (both bilateral and multilateral) and the dependability of extended nuclear deterrence, the Group noted the increased risk of nuclear proliferation, the vulnerability of liberal democratic governments and political and legal norms, and the weakening of international diplomatic, economic and security cooperation. Post-1945 US alliances should not be taken for granted and participants reflected on these developments, considering how the UK and Japan could cooperate to mitigate the risks. The UK and Japan should seek to maintain dialogue and alliances with the US, while building alliances and partnerships with like-minded countries.

On UK-Japan military cooperation, participants suggested the UK should support greater Japanese involvement in AUKUS. UK-Japan defence industry collaboration should be further encouraged, but there remained technical and political impediments on both sides, which the group would urge its governments to address.

Session 5: Information, Cyber and AI

The Group heard presentations on AI innovation and cyber security. Over the last three years, progress on AI models had been rapid. International focus had moved from AI safety to international competitiveness. Open AI models had proliferated but were not error-free. Next stage models would enable workflow automation and idea generation within two years. Large AI companies will continue to dominate, but emerging companies have a realistic potential to compete. As a result, each nation is mobilising an unprecedented level of support for its national AI capabilities.

Group members commented on the pace of AI development and the need to regulate for safety and security. The use of AI in education also required more urgent policy input.

Cyber security was increasingly an integral part of national defence and security. In the case of cyber security, the threats have developed and are worsening beyond the expectations of the existing legal framework and should be urgently addressed. UK-Japan cooperation on cyber security is both mutually beneficial and increasingly necessary: partnerships permitted a more effective response; limited expertise required sharing of resources; partnership on cooperative defence projects, such as

GCAP, required a joint approach to cyber security; and cooperation helped improve domestic capabilities beyond the individual projects.

Participants acknowledged that cyber threats crossed borders and sectors, and targeted both public and private bodies and increasingly proliferated in the so-called grey zone. While commending Japan's efforts in introducing the Security Clearance and Active Cyber Defence frameworks, members agreed Japan needed to work closely with partners such as the UK to improve its own cyber security capabilities. This should include national technology and talent development, leading to the creation of a robust cyber security ecosystem which should include academia.

Session 6: Climate Change and Energy Security

The Group considered climate change and energy security measures adopted by private sector companies, and policy support from governments. Japan's 7th Basic Energy Plan sought to strengthen industrial policies to link energy structure transformation with economic growth. This was combined with a shift back towards a focus on energy security and improving economic efficiency. To address the increase in power demand, a combination of renewables and nuclear would be necessary. Energy was central to the geopolitical agenda. In the UK there had been considerable progress on decarbonising the electricity system with ambitions for achieving a clean power system by 2030. Electrification was central to achieving net zero, but demand had been slower than expected. The Group agreed on the importance of blended finance to support both low-emission and renewable energy projects especially in emerging countries.

Group members agreed on the need for alignment of decarbonisation policies of the two governments but wondered how realistic the targets were given a lack of nuclear engineering capacity and cost of living issues which would affect deployment. In the UK there was interest in developing and deploying Small Modular Reactors. Participants hoped the UK and Japan would continue to lead governments and the private sector in action on climate change and positively engage their citizens in the transition to renewable energy.

Recommendations below

UK-Japan 21st Century Group 41st Annual Conference: Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from discussions of the UK-Japan 21st Century Group at its 41st conference:

- The Group welcomes the positive response to its previous recommendations and reiterates the importance of closer UK-Japan cooperation across a range of issues.
- Building upon the Hiroshima Accord, and particularly at a time of increasing geopolitical tensions, the Group urges both governments to reaffirm their shared values and common interests and pursue a strategic approach to impact on global issues and events.

Multilateral and Bilateral Cooperation

- The Group believes the UK and Japan should continue to strengthen their bilateral security cooperation and strategic dialogue, reaffirming UK and Japanese commitment to the Indo Pacific region and the Euro-Atlantic area respectively.
- The Group also welcomes the establishment of the UK-Japan Economic 2+2 dialogue and recommends continuing close economic cooperation.
- The Group welcomes the UK's leadership role in bringing together international support for Ukraine and encourages Japan to enhance its commitment to Ukraine.
- The Group sees value in the two governments sharing best practice in engaging the US administration.
- The Group believes the UK and Japan should reaffirm the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and their opposition to any attempts unilaterally to change the status quo by force.
- The Group continues to support reform of the United Nations and the Security Council, including permanent membership for Japan. The UK and Japan should urgently consider whether a potential reform package might damage the effectiveness of multilateral organisations and be prepared to contribute robustly to the debate on reform.
- The Group welcomes the UK's accession to the CPTPP and looks positively towards the establishment of a CPTPP secretariat, bringing a collective approach to securing the reduction of barriers to trade between the EU and CPTPP partners and strengthening the voices of CPTPP countries, including Mexico and Canada, in countering protectionist tendencies. A constructive dialogue with the EU would be welcome.

Defence and Security

- The Group recommends the governments of the UK and Japan establish a dialogue to share assessments of the risk to the status quo across the Taiwan straits, discuss measures needed to avert conflict, and to promote the resilience of Taiwan against the use of force.
- The Group welcomes discussion in Japan on further strengthening extended deterrence in the region, with a view to reinforcing strategic stability in Northeast Asia. Recognising the indivisibility of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security, Japan and the UK should exchange views on nuclear deterrence in each region to help enhance global nuclear deterrence.
- Welcoming the application of the Reciprocal Access Agreement, the Group saw value in further exercises and joint operations to enhance interoperability, including during the visit of the UK's Carrier Strike Group to Asia in 2025.
- The Group supports the protection of safe passage and secure sea-lanes in the Indo-Pacific, especially the congested sea-lanes of the western pacific. The Group further encourages the UK and Japan to explore the scope for cooperation with regional partners on maintaining the openness of sea-lanes in the Indo-Pacific region.
- The Group supports further enhancing UK-Japan defence industry collaboration and recognises the need to bring Japan's defence equipment transfer guidelines in line with broader national security and strategic objectives to enable protected information sharing between UK and Japanese industry.
- Mutual reassurance created in the alignment of defence technology for GCAP, and other programmes, should help enable further industrial and defence collaboration.
- The Group welcomes the prospect of Japan's participation in Pillar Two of AUKUS and looks towards to further enhancement and deepening of cooperation between these partners in defence technology and equipment, leading in time to Japan's participation in aspects of Pillar One.
- The Group notes the urgency of increased information and intelligence sharing once the necessary political and legal adjustments to facilitate sensitive collaboration and information exchange are in place.
- The Group encourages both governments to work together on continued reforms to information security legislation, security clearance and vetting, sharing of cyber threat intelligence, and mutual recognition of cyber professionals.
- The Group also supports the development of joint degree programmes between UK and Japanese universities on cyber security, and a dialogue to

explore standards alignment and interoperability on cyber security between the UK and Japan.

International Development Cooperation

- The Group recognises the pressures on ODA budgets but encourages both governments to maintain ODA levels as far as they can amidst ongoing political tensions, considering the significant space left by the withdrawal of the US from international bodies.
- Recalling the detailed recommendations on UK-Japan development cooperation from its 2023 conference, the Group recommends closer policy coordination to maximise the sustainable impact of ODA in recipient countries including engagement with the UK and Japanese private sector who have expertise in development.

People to People Exchanges

- The Group strongly supports the promotion of people to people exchange in the spirit of the 2023 UK/Japan Memorandum of Cooperation. The working holiday visa programme had been extremely successful, and its expansion was very welcome.
- The Group would like to see a wide range of official visitors, including Ministers, from all parts of the UK to the Osaka Expo in 2025. It would be particularly important for the UK to be represented at the highest possible level for the UK national day on 22 May.
- Given the relative lack of engagement in traditional political activities by young people in both countries, the Group would like to see more exchange opportunities between students and young parliamentarians to help promote trust in politics and governance.
- The Group remains in favour of encouraging a youth-based parallel grouping to the UK-Japan 21st Century Group (virtual or real) to encourage the active and sustained involvement of young people in the bilateral relationship.
- The Group also recommends the promotion of interparliamentary exchanges, as well as the possibility of joint Select Committee exchanges on issues such as immigration and cyber security.
- The Group recommends an increase in the exchange of officials between the two countries, including between the two central banks.

University and research partnerships

- The Group recommends strengthening the role of the UK and Japan not only in enhancing national security but also in driving forward collaborative

research in cutting-edge science, technology and innovation including in the fields of AI and health.

- The Group encourages the UK government to discuss with defence industry representatives involved in joint programmes with Japan the establishment of education and exchange programs designed to incentivise young Japanese and UK students to pursue studies relevant to the UK-Japan strategic partnership, especially in areas related to defence industry collaboration.
- The Group is concerned that closure of centres of excellence in Japanese and East Asian studies at UK universities will lead to a notable diminution in expertise required to pursue the long-term strategic partnerships outlined in the Hiroshima Accord of 2023. The group urges the UK government to consider how best to retain knowledge and talent and ensure the long-term viability of Japanese and East Asian studies in the UK.
- Given concerns over potential restrictions on academic freedom in several countries, including the United States, institutions in the UK and Japan should be proactive in attracting academic talent globally. In this context, the Group urges the UK government to rejoin the Erasmus Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport.
- The Group also advocates the establishment of a new dedicated academic exchange and scholarship programme between the UK and Japan to support the resilience of open societies and free and unfettered collaborative academic research across a range of disciplines, including the natural sciences, arts, humanities and social sciences.
- Private sector support from UK companies would be especially welcome in facilitating more sustainable long-term academic exchanges and support for new scholarships for undergraduate and graduate students from the two countries.
- Both governments should encourage investment in innovative programmes that commercialise the high-quality research in the UK and Japan.

Climate Change and Energy Security

- The Group encourages the UK and Japan to work together on energy transition in support of economic security and growth in addition to their efforts in mitigating climate change.
- The Group recommends both governments consider how the energy system in a low carbon environment can be developed to minimise costs, based on a comparison of overall system costs rather than specific technologies in isolation.
- In that connection, the Group reiterates its concerns about different carbon pricing and carbon border adjustment regimes in some significant economies.

- The Group urges the UK and Japan, with others where appropriate, to work for greater consistency and clarity for market participants and less disruption to trade.
- The group recommends both governments work together with other G7 countries to enhance the flow of funds to developing countries to support their various pathways to scale up their green energy capacity.
- The Group would welcome joint UK and Japan consideration of support mechanisms, demand, and stimulation of specific technologies, such as floating offshore wind or small modular reactors, to help boost confidence and help drive deployment, learning lessons from deployment globally.
- The Group remains concerned that decisions by the US will affect the momentum delivered by recent COP agreements and urges both governments to use their roles in the G7 and other fora to strengthen global leadership on climate action.

Global Health Collaboration

- As outlined by former co-chair Keizo Takemi at the 2024 conference, the Group supports enhanced collaboration and research into vaccine development, drug discovery, and deployment of diagnostics, surveillance, and evaluation. The Group also supports a separate working group of experts to implement specific collaboration between the UK and Japan in this regard including through existing frameworks such as CEPI.
- In collaborating on vaccine and drug development the Group encourages both governments to address the issue of pricing and regulatory mechanisms for new and innovative drugs, particularly in the light of the UK's new Industrial Strategy and the Life Sciences New Deal.
- The Group continues to encourage closer UK/Japan cooperation on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response (PPR); neglected infectious diseases; antimicrobial resistance (AMR); climate change-related health security; mental health, and chronic and age-related diseases.
- The Group believes it important to encourage closer links between the UK Health Security Agency and Japan Institute for Health Security (JIHS).
- The Group recommends the UK and Japan consider hosting a global health and innovation summit, to enhance the two countries' global leadership in health and life sciences, re-affirm strong commitment to global health and patient access, and consider the implications of US withdrawal from international health bodies.
- Considering the disparities in UHC access in South-East Asian countries, we would like to see the UK and Japan working jointly in the region, drawing on

work done to prevent pandemics (including stockpiling vaccines or therapeutics for third country emergencies). They could draw on respective initiatives by the UK and Japan including the ASEAN-UK Health Security Partnership, ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED), and through the UHC Knowledge Hub in Tokyo.

Artificial Intelligence

- Given the current geopolitical tension, the Group reiterates its recommendations from 2024 on AI, including consideration of a Geneva-style protocol to prohibit the use of autonomous systems in nuclear command, control and communication.
- The Group calls on the UK and Japan to continue their efforts to support AI competitiveness within the emerging global ecosystem.
- The Group would welcome collaboration between our respective competition authorities in examining the impact of AI on competition in digital markets.
- The Group urges development of policy on the use of AI in education.
- Both governments should actively contribute to global initiatives that protect children and others online and share experience of implementing controls nationally.
- The Group encourages both governments to explore how they can adopt high performing, trustworthy AI to deliver the government's missions, ideally in collaboration.

These recommendations are based on a consensus among participants but should not be interpreted to imply that they represent the view of individual participants or the organisations which they represent.