



21st Century Group

UK-Japan 21st Century Group 42nd Annual Conference, March 2026

Chair's Summary

The 42nd Annual meeting of the UK-Japan 21st Century Group was held on 13-15 March in Fujiyoshida. The meeting was chaired by Mr Seiji Kihara MP, Japanese Co-Chair and the Rt Hon Lord McConnell, UK Co-Chair.

31 Japanese and 25 British participants, including parliamentarians and senior representatives from business, the media, academia, think tanks and the diplomatic service from both countries, took part.

Tokyo Programme

A lunch for both British and Japanese participants was hosted by Her Excellency Ambassador Julia Longbottom at the British Embassy on 12 March. The Ambassador welcomed members of the Group and stressed the importance of the annual dialogue. She underlined the high pace of exchanges since the Economic 2+2 meeting last March, including through the Osaka Kansai Expo, visit of the Carrier Strike Group, the closer security partnership and, most recently, the British Prime Minister's visit to Tokyo in January 2026. The two Prime Ministers had acknowledged that there was more scope for cooperation, particularly in frontier tech, AI, science and innovation. Mr Kihara and Lord McConnell agreed: a close UK/Japan relationship was important to both countries, but now increasingly important more broadly given recent geopolitical developments.

Call on the Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary

The British participants, accompanied by the Japanese Co-Chair, called on Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Kei Sato on 12 March as the Prime Minister was unavailable. Mr Sato noted that the current unstable international environment made it increasingly important for the UK and Japan to cooperate closely. Prime Minister Starmer's visit in January had been a welcome opportunity to strengthen the relationship further. Examples of defence and security cooperation, including the GCAP project and the visit by the UK's Carrier Strike Group in 2025, helped to underline the importance of the bilateral relationship. There were also mutual economic benefits to working together, including through closer industrial cooperation and working to establish resilient supply chains. Mr Kihara and Lord McConnell hoped the Group's recommendations would help provide input for Prime Minister Takaichi's visit to the UK later in 2026. Lord McConnell noted that the Group's recommendations had often helpfully prefigured changes at official level. The current uncertain international environment made it increasingly important that the UK and Japan worked together to help uphold the values and institutions we had helped to build.

Foreign Ministry Reception

In the evening of 12 March, participants attended a reception hosted by State Minister for Foreign Affairs Iwao Horii on behalf of Minister Toshimitsu Motegi. In his address, Mr Horii relayed a positive message from Minister Motegi about the strength of UK/Japan relations, highlighted by Prime Ministers Takaichi and Starmer when they met in January. Close cooperation between like-minded countries such as Japan and the UK was critically important at this time. He hoped the Group's discussions would produce constructive recommendations for both governments to take forward.

Fujiyoshida Conference

At the start of the conference, Mr. Kano welcomed participants on behalf of Mr. Kihara who was unavoidably detained in the Diet. Lord McConnell responded by thanking the Japanese hosts for the organisation of the conference and the stunning location.

Session 1: Political and Economic Developments in Japan and the UK: Balancing Economic Growth and Fiscal Discipline

The Group discussed political and economic developments in both Japan and the UK. Group members heard a presentation on the impact on Japan's economy of external developments, including the policies of the second Trump Administration and the potential risks to international finance from both those policies and more fundamental global challenges. Members discussed the recent history of Japan's economy and the impact of the continuing fiscal and monetary challenges Japan faced. The new Japanese government had committed to easing the cost of living and investing in crisis management, but the weakening yen and bond market instability remained to be addressed, as did greater adoption of AI and flexibility on immigration.

In the UK, problems of weak economic growth and increasing fragmentation of political parties had been exacerbated first by the Brexit referendum and then the global pandemic. Popular disaffection had led to the Labour landslide victory in 2024, although Labour's share of the vote was historically low for a ruling party. The government has made significant investments into the NHS, education, other public services and infrastructure to promote economic growth, but significant structural challenges remain. The choice between increasing taxation or under-investing in public services was unpopular, coupled with a growing divide between those who had benefited from globalisation and those left behind. Broader geopolitical tensions also risked undermining the government's growth strategy.

Group members discussed the economic challenges for both countries and noted the opportunities for cooperation and growth, such as the overlap of Japan's strategic investment areas with the UK's industrial strategy priorities. Areas of challenge for both countries present opportunities for growth and cooperation, for example defence, partnerships, information and communication (such as AI development) and energy. And though recent international developments negatively impacted growth, they also offered opportunities through the creation of new multilateral markets, such as the CPTPP.

The Group reflected on the importance of considering the kind of society our countries should try to foster, and the importance of quality of life.

Session 2: Roles of the UK and Japan in an Era of Great Power Politics

The post-war and Cold War stance of the US had shifted significantly under the second Trump Administration, with a radically new national strategy differing significantly from that of previous decades. Reliance on American commitment to bilateral and multilateral alliances could no longer be taken for granted. Russia, China and now the US risked undermining the post-war order by the increasing use of force and coercion. The Group heard presentations on the possible role the UK and Japan could play in shaping, coalescing, and leading the response to these actions.

Russia Iran and DPRK, had reintroduced the threat and use of military power to advance their international objectives. China has been increasing its coercion in some areas. Increasingly, US national security strategy is seen by some as adding to this geopolitical uncertainty. Working jointly and with like-minded partners, in multilateral or mini-lateral and regional alliances, the UK and Japan could help prevent this normalisation of military coercion. Similarly, the UK and Japan could play a role in helping ensure rare earth and critical mineral access, resilient supply chains and the protection of critical infrastructure including maritime infrastructure.

Group members discussed several factors threatening global stability and the rule of law, particularly growing Chinese assertiveness, greater US reliance on force, and social media effects on public opinion. They discussed the need to raise public awareness of these threats, the continuing importance of the Hiroshima Accord and the need to implement its elements as fully as possible.

The Group discussed the importance of political leaders in assessing the cultural and societal impacts of the rapidly changing geo-political and technological world order on future generations in their own nations.

Session 3: Space and Cyber Security: Advancing Partnership in Emerging Strategic Domains of Foreign Affairs and Security

The Group heard presentations on space and cyber collaboration. Space technology, applications and cyber and digital connectivity are all part of critical national infrastructure. NATO had agreed in 2019 that space would be a domain of operations and agreed an overarching space policy. Japan did the same. Although around 90 countries had operational satellites, the majority of launches were carried out by a private company - SpaceX (165 launches compared to 90 by China, 7 by Arianespace and 4 by Japan). Investing in space capabilities did not necessarily imply military capabilities: In-Orbit Servicing, Assembly and Manufacturing (ISAM) covered an array of novel activities that are expected in space over coming years: the microgravity and natural vacuum environment in space is conducive to the production of metal alloys, pharmaceuticals and semiconductors. Members discussed possible areas of UK/Japan collaboration including launch capability, debris removal and strengthening international legal frameworks.

The Group heard about Japan's Cyber Control Center established in 2014 and the advances since then in both cyber-attacks and capabilities to defend against them. Japan's Cyber Security Strategy, launched at the end of 2025, drew on the experience of the UK's National Cyber Security Centre. It aims to enhance both awareness and response in defending the public against cyber threats. Collaboration between public and private sectors remained crucial. In January 2026, following the meeting of UK and Japanese Prime Ministers in Tokyo, a Japan-UK strategic cyber partnership was announced.

Members expressed concerns about Chinese domestic laws which forced the storage of business data in China for foreign companies operating there. There was concern about the need to protect undersea cables or develop alternative resilience channels. There was concern also about the need to integrate specific measures to protect biological genome data into broader cyber security defence. Group members raised the issue of developing the technological skills required to defend against cyber-attacks as demonstrated in Ukraine.

Session 4: UK-Japan Collaboration in Advanced Science, Technology, Education and Research

The Group discussed UK-Japan connections in advanced science and technology with presentations on key areas for cooperation including quantum technologies, AI, technology for manufacturing and for responding to societal and demographic changes. Members considered research excellence, scaling and innovation of the impact of such research, and development of future skills. We should take advantage of our complementary expertise: UK entrepreneurship and Japanese manufacturing technology at scale. We need to identify what expertise is required on both sides and enable its development by creating a beneficial environment through networking and exchange.

The Group also heard a presentation on the strategic value of quantum technologies and on Japan's successful Q-STAR programme, incorporating the public and private sector, and users and providers of technology. Countries were struggling to build competing quantum ecosystems and AI models to avoid reliance on others. Japan's strategy focussed on research, vision and industry. The Q-STAR programme began in 2021 and aims to establish Japan's leadership in global standards and the global supply chain through three elements: use cases; test beds and standardisation. In 2025 an MOU was signed with UKQuantum, focussing on Industry and research exchange; policy and advocacy alignment; international collaboration; and joint event and awareness campaigns.

Participants agreed on the importance of drawing on complementary skills, exchanging researchers, and encouraging industry to industry links, particularly in areas such as life sciences where both Japan and the UK had strengths. They discussed various benefits from AI and other advanced technologies, but also potential challenges and risks in such areas as jobs, education, intellectual property, and to humanity more generally.

Session 5: UK-Japan Leadership in Addressing Global Health and Other Global Challenges as National Security Issues

The Group discussed challenges and trends in international cooperation on global health. Since the pandemic, awareness of the need to address global health challenges had increased. However, more recently, there was a weakening of existing health institutions with several players bypassing these institutions altogether and operating bilaterally. This had created difficulties in cooperating globally and had led to a multiplicity of channels for international cooperation. The UK and Japan should continue to work, where possible, through existing institutions while adopting a flexible approach in order to work with others when necessary.

Participants also heard a presentation on global health challenges including demographic transition, the growing impact of non-communicable diseases, and the emergence of new pathogens and Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR). Coupled with these, we are seeing staff shortages in the health sector globally. Addressing the challenges of financing healthcare is therefore becoming increasingly important as health systems adapt to ageing societies and the predominance of chronic diseases. At the same time, these challenges could also represent an opportunity to stimulate economic growth through the further development and strengthening of the healthcare and life-sciences industries. It is becoming increasingly important to adapt health systems to ageing societies and the predominance of chronic diseases. The emergence of new pathogens and AMR means it is necessary to strengthen global health security in the face of national security risks. The shortage of health workers in both the UK and Japan is being tackled differently in each country, but new and more innovative approaches to deal with this issue are needed.

Group members discussed the need to focus joint efforts in one or two key areas and explored joint projects for vaccine development, bio-security and responding to mental health issues. The UK-Japan MOC on health cooperation provided a helpful framework for the private sector. However, more should be done to create meaningful public-private implementation programmes that could accelerate health and economic impacts in both countries. It was noted that in advance of Prime Minister Takaichi's visit to the UK later in 2026, there were plans for an MOU between our two health security institutes on bilateral cooperation and initiatives on global health.

Session 6: Strengthening Multilateral Frameworks in Foreign and Security Policy: Sea Lane Security and the CPTPP

Participants discussed the importance of sea lane security. In the case of Japan, most manufactured exports and a large proportion of imports travelled by sea. For the UK, with greater emphasis on services and a link to the European continent, the proportion was slightly smaller. Japan also faced potentially hostile neighbours, with increased sea lane security risks. Both countries were affected by distant choke-points, including the current tension in the Straits of Hormuz. Undersea cables have been targeted by hostile actors in the Baltic, around Taiwan and in Europe. As multilateral institutions have been unable to provide effective protection, we have increasingly had to turn to regional and ad hoc arrangements.

Cumulative geopolitical changes, including increasing assertiveness of China, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and US inclinations towards force and coercion, mean the UK and Japan need to seek closer cooperation on defence and security issues, and also economic security. The Economic 2 + 2 meeting in March 2025 and the UK-Japan Industrial Strategy Partnership provided opportunities to take this cooperation forward. The growth strategy of the new Japanese government and the UK's industrial strategy overlap well, with considerable scope for cooperation in several sectors. Key elements of Japan's Economic Security Promotion Act (ESPA) are also elements of joint importance to the UK.

Group members commented positively on shared UK and Japan commitment to economic security and defence areas for continuing cooperation. There were opportunities to work more closely on several aspects of the CPTPP, and on helping to ensure resilient connections including for critical sectors such as pharmaceuticals and finance

Recommendations below

UK-Japan 21st Century Group 42nd Annual Conference: Conclusions and Recommendations

The following conclusions and recommendations emerged from discussions of the UK-Japan 21st Century Group at its 42nd conference:

- The Group welcomes the positive response to its previous recommendations and reiterates the fundamental importance of closer UK-Japan cooperation.
- Japan and the UK should use multilateral and bilateral opportunities to promote our values and to strengthen support for democracy, open societies, the rule of Law, and international cooperation to deter any damage to the status quo by force.
- Now more than ever, at a time of geopolitical uncertainty, the Group reaffirms the continuing importance of the Hiroshima Accord and the value of a shared approach to global tensions.
- The Group express concern at the potential global impact of the current situation in the Middle East region and hopes that both governments will continue to engage in active diplomacy to mitigate those potential impacts.
- We urge both governments to continue their efforts to secure energy supplies including their commitment to increased use of de-carbonised energy sources.
- The UK and Japan will benefit from working closely together to tackle economic and fiscal policy challenges and promoting growth. The Group believes in the importance of competition and entrepreneurship as key to securing long-term growth. In this respect, the reduction of regulatory compliance burdens and the simplification of tax measures and an appropriate level of public and private investment would be helpful in stimulating business scale-up and competitiveness.

Multilateral and Bilateral Cooperation

- The Group believes the UK and Japan should continue to strengthen their bilateral security cooperation and strategic dialogue, reaffirming the indivisibility of UK and Japanese commitment to the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic areas respectively.
- The Group sees continuing value in the two governments sharing insights in engaging the US administration. The UK and Japan may need to take on greater joint responsibility in defending freedom of navigation, access to critical mineral supplies, and maintaining resilient supply chains.

- The Group reaffirms support for multilateral bodies and the rules-based system, while recognising the need for reform. We also recognise the growing importance of mini-lateral alliances between like-minded countries. We should also work with regional and non-government partners, drawing on their expertise and complementary capabilities.
- In tackling these and other challenges, it remains important to build a favourable international environment by using our international development tools as a critical element of our defence and security activity, including the international targets that both governments are committed to.
- As the UK and Japan have helped shape the multilateral approach to trade and security policy in past decades, the Group believes there is an important role in contributing to rules and standards on issues such as AI, life science, bio-tech, cyber and space policy.
- The UK and Japan should work together to convince public opinion in each country of the growing risks to international stability and the opportunities of working closely together in tackling them, particularly for the longer term. They should coordinate closely to counter disinformation and the damaging effects of social media.
- The Group recommends that the UK and Japanese governments also consider advocacy and public information campaigns to alert their domestic populations to the internal and external threats to their national security.

Defence and Security

- The group welcomes the public commitment of both governments to significant expansion of defence, intelligence and security capacity.
- Promotion of a rules-based approach remains essential. The UK and Japan must draw on their experience over previous decades in defending against the normalisation of force and coercion.
- The Group supports further enhancing UK-Japan defence industry collaboration including implementation of the commitment to existing programmes such as GCAP in line with broader national security and strategic objectives.
- We recommend the UK and Japan should increase industrial participation in existing government-to-government agreements, such as engaging with the High-Level Steering Panel that meets twice a year to discuss Defence cooperation.

- The Group would welcome further elaboration of Japan's foreign direct investment in the defence sector, to foster further collaboration and investment. The Group would also welcome early publication of the UK Defence Investment Plan.
- The Group recommends the establishment of a reciprocal arrangement to assist in the sharing of sensitive information which would allow authorised companies in each country to handle sensitive information and above.
- Building on the successful GCAP partnership between the UK, Japan and Italy for new fighter aircraft, the UK and Japan should explore similar partnerships, including developing effective capacity in subsea vehicles, and a wider maritime tech partnership.
- The Group reiterates its support for 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 in maintaining the openness of sea-lanes in the Indo-Pacific region.
- The continuation of regular joint maritime exercises will help send a valuable signal to allies and others in the Indo-Pacific region.

Mediation and Conflict Prevention

- We confirm the importance of regular dialogue and diplomacy, including track 2 diplomacy, to foster positive international relations and prevent conflict.
- The group welcomes the Government of Japan's plans to establish a dedicated mediation capacity within the Foreign Ministry and would welcome cooperation between this and the conflict prevention capacity in the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office.

Space collaboration and Cyber policy

- The Group welcomes the launch by both Prime Ministers of new opportunities for research and development to support space collaboration.
- Through UK-Japan Space consultation, our two governments should recognise the value of supporting new technologies through contracts for demonstrator projects or national applications: priorities could include active debris removal and space solar energy generation.
- It is also important to create a legal and regulatory environment for space activities and protection of data.

- The Space relationship should also consider how collaboration based on the H3 launcher (and possibly a UK-based light satellite launch capability in the future) might add to the resilience of launch capacity available to the two nations and their allies.
- The Group welcomes the Japan-UK Strategic Cyber Partnership announced following the meeting of the two Prime Ministers in January 2026 and fully supports information sharing and the encouragement of education and training and the development of technical standards.
- In Japan, the strengthening of Japan's national intelligence services will be important for cyber defence as will close cooperation between public and private sectors and academic institutions.
- Given the growing strategic importance of biological data and pathogen surveillance for national resilience and bio-security, the UK and Japan could consider strengthening cooperation on health data security, genomic surveillance and early warning capabilities, including how these systems might complement existing cyber security, critical infrastructure protection and national resilience frameworks.
- There may also be a role for the UK and Japan to work together on international advocacy on cyber policy and creating a regulatory environment which could be useful for other partners.

CPTPP and Trade

- The UK and Japan, through the development of trade liberalisation in the CPTPP and in the UK's reset with the EU, should seek to promote open markets and free trade, countering protectionist tendencies. The UK should ensure any improved trading agreements with the EU do not adversely affect UK membership of, and obligations under, the CPTPP. We welcome the dialogue between the EU and CPTPP.
- There is an important role for both countries in working together within the CPTPP to facilitate new membership of that organisation.
- The UK and Japan could also work together to deploy resources to consider future development of the agreement including updating CPTPP rules to reflect recent changes in the international environment, and technological changes since the organisation's establishment.
- It is important to establish multilateral rules within the CPTPP for mutual supply chain sustainability in critical areas. This requires a robust international framework which is resilient to supply disruptions. This is particularly important for items such as pharmaceuticals and other essential supplies. There is also a need for a robust financial framework including a secure payments system.

Science and research collaboration

- The Group recommends that both governments encourage the development of graduate and undergraduate programmes to foster interdisciplinary expertise in technology, science and diplomacy.
- The UK and Japan should seek to build on the existing Japan-UK Quantum MOU by encouraging exchanges between quantum talent and startups, enabling fast track mobility and joint acceleration for tech entrepreneurs.
- The UK and Japan should also strengthen joint leadership in international standards and governance through coordinated contributions to standards bodies and global forums.
- UK – Japan collaboration on quantum technology could also be extended to third countries with cooperative partners.
- As frontier science increasingly depends on cross-disciplinary platform technologies, the UK and Japan may wish to consider biological data platforms - including genomics and multi-omics as foundational technologies within the strategic technology landscape alongside artificial intelligence, quantum computing and cyber capabilities.
- The UK and Japan should work together to establish a common framework for evaluating and auditing medical AI and promote cooperation on practical supply chain development for the clean energy sources which are essential to AI and quantum technologies.

Global Health Collaboration

- Japan and the UK share strong commitments to Universal Health Coverage, support for innovation, and access to vaccines, and should reaffirm these principles.
- The UK and Japan reaffirm support for global health governance and technical leadership, including through support for multilateral institutions such as the WHO.
- To accelerate preparedness for the next pandemic, both countries should consider a UK–Japan biosecurity plan, and jointly elaborate CEPI-backed projects, for collaboration between their BSL-4 laboratories, pathogen data sharing, and joint development of prototype vaccines for emerging pathogens, and protecting the blood supply.

- The Group supports expertise sharing and adoption through a bilateral track to share expertise from the world first “real time” pandemic metagenomic sequencing ICU surveillance network currently being established across the UK. This would deliver a coordinated, cross-government diagnostics preparedness framework, ensuring both countries engage proactively with advanced monitoring and diagnostic sectors to support pandemic preparedness and surveillance.
- In response to the wider global challenges identified in public health, the Group recommends action in four areas:
 - 1) Building health systems adapted to ageing societies and chronic diseases (redesigning care models, shifting the focus to prevention and early intervention, and care models that can be exported to countries facing similar issues)
 - 2) Strengthening global health security (building a joint surveillance and early warning system combining genomics, diagnostics and real time data sharing to support coordinated public health response and pandemic preparedness, accelerating vaccines and novel antibiotics, protecting critical infrastructure such as blood supply and laboratory networks)
 - 3) Addressing workforce shortages through technology, care models and improved productivity (modernising education and training, and retention, increasing productivity combining Japan’s strengths in automation with the UK’s skills in AI and digital health)
 - 4) Positioning the UK and Japan as global leaders in health innovation and global health partnerships (develop a health innovation corridor for academic science, venture capital, clinical application and industrial manufacturing, support the scaling up of mid-size life-science companies, including through identification of public-private programmes of common national interest, support strategic M&A, promote blended finance models).
- In the light of demographic change and rising healthcare demand, there may be opportunities for the UK and Japan to deepen collaboration on population-scale genomic health data systems, genomic medicine, and early diagnosis intervention initiatives, including for non-communicable and rare disease.

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.