What Is the UK After In the Waters of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean?

The series of events in the “a tanker for a tanker war” between Iran and the West in the Strait of Hormuz, the most important strategic part of the Persian Gulf, has been watched by the world’s leading politicians, political scientists and media for several weeks now. Analyses of the reasons, changes in the positions of the parties involved, their short-term and long-term goals and objectives, scenarios of withdrawing from the tense situation are very ambiguous. Some saw in it the aspiration of Washington to wreak havoc in this region, since it is easier “to catch a goldfish” in the muddy water. Others understand it as the desire to found a coalition for establishing new (anti-Iranian) rules of navigation and to pin down the obstinate Iran with various sanctions.

At first (before B. Johnson’s election as Prime Minister), a cunning trap laid by US for London with the purpose to show the UK its place was considered, as the latter showed some independence at a decidedly unsuitable time for its own political change and attempted to carry out the Brexit as soon as possible, etc.

It would be undesirable to repeat the unexpected and drastic turns of events: they are already abundant on the pages of all serious media worldwide. On the one hand, it is probably worth taking a broader look at them, as they certainly will have long-term effects for the whole world because of a possible “oil deficit” and a changed strategic arrangement of forces in the region. And, on the other hand, one had better focus on analyzing the role and attitude of Britain, which, for some reason or other, became one of the centers of the conflict. In our opinion, it needs to be made, considering several important circumstances.

First, in the course of events which started with the US threats to begin military operations against Iran, the Pentagon’s fighting spirit disappeared. The US plan to send 120,000 soldiers to Iran seemed unfeasible since they would be met by more than 650,000 soldiers of the Iranian armed forces. This despite the fact that, in 2018, the Pentagon designed the document OPLAN 1002-18 on capturing a number of ports in the Persian Gulf and the Khuzestan Province where 80% of the Iranian oil and gas reserves are located and where separatist sentiment is strong. It is essential that this province is close to the partially controlled Iraq, not far from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which contains the possible countermeasures of Iran, but also makes those 120,000 troops sufficient for such action in case of possible support of the aircraft and the fleet from the bases of these adjacent countries.

Secondly, for the purpose of ensuring a greater reliability of its actions, the USCENTCOM designed the multinational naval operation Sentinel, and the US Administration officially urged Germany, France and the UK to join the naval mission for “ensuring safe navigation” through the Strait of Hormuz and “countering Iran’s aggression.”

Germany rejected this request: it has to be approved by the Parliament first. Almost all leading political forces of the country are against participating in any missions of the US against Iran. Germany is not really interested in the events in the flashpoints, since its energy security does not depend on the disputes with Iran, as it receives most of its oil from the Russian Federation or from other suppliers who do not transport it through this strait.

France is somewhat hesitant concerning participation in the initiative of the US. However, since France receives most of its oil from the Persian Gulf (Saudi Arabia is its largest supplier), it is in its best interests that the situation in the region should not be tense.

The UK, more than any other state, is inclined to partake in the US mission, since Iran held a British tanker, and Saudi Arabia is the main supplier of aviation fuel to the country. Without having sufficient forces in the Persian Gulf,
the UK, it would seem, would support the US cause. But this purpose required the rise of the still mysterious and unpredictable Boris Johnson as the country’s Prime Minister.

Thirdly, soon after he was appointed Prime Minister, B. Johnson abandoned T. May’s doubts and, on August 5 of this year, the accession to the alliance with Washington was officially declared on the one hand. And on the other, probably, in order to strengthen the positions within the country and in the world in general, he was the first to present the idea to create a European naval coalition for ensuring the security of vessels in the Strait of Hormuz. The idea was then approved by France, the Netherlands and Italy, interest was expressed by Spain, Sweden, Poland and even Germany. It was decided that the ships of the UK Naval Forces would accompany cargo vessels under the British flag in the Strait of Hormuz and, for this purpose, the destroyer Duncan already entered the waters of the Persian Gulf.

Fourthly, the Russian Federation MFA made a number of proposals for strengthening the security in the region. In particular, establishing the Organization for Security and Cooperation which would include the Persian Gulf States, Russia, China, the US, the EU, India, etc.; compliance of the regional participants with international law; transparent cooperation in the military sphere; taking steps on transforming the region into an area without weapons of mass destruction; abandoning permanent foreign bases and gradual reduction of the military presence of the non-regional players. It is possible to establish a collective security system by carrying out consultations on a bilateral and multilateral basis, including those with the participation of the League of Arab States and the UN.

Fifthly, it is necessary to keep in mind that the UK had, has and will have its own interests and positions both in the Persian Gulf, and in its vicinity, in the Indian Ocean. It is necessary to acknowledge that, before the 2010s, there was practically no mention of the Indian Ocean region, or the Indian Ocean Rim (the regional structure of cooperation, IORA for short) during the debates of the British parliament. However, according to the plans unveiled at the end of 2014, the UK announced placing large military platforms, aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, other support ships, planes of the Royal Naval Force and the Royal Air Force on the modernized base Mina Salman in Bahrain (the necessary sum of $23 million for expanding its operation opportunities was provided by both parties). The then Minister of Foreign Affairs Philip Hammond emphasized that this measure was designed to stabilize the situation in the Persian Gulf and to protect the British interests in Libya and the neighboring areas. In our opinion, it marked the beginning of London’s gradual return to the east from the Suez Canal.

During Theresa May’s time as Prime Minister, the Foreign and Commonwealth adopted the slogan “Global Britain” with 3 priorities of interests around the world:

- North America, especially the US and Canada;
- Europe with allies and partners;
- Asia, a center of economic and political growth, maintaining the influence in which will become the key success factor of the slogan.

If the UK returns to the east from the Suez Canal, to Asia, then it has to be done by sea, through the Indian Ocean where, according to the forecasts made by the Asian Development Bank, the growth in the Asian Age directed by China, India, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and Thailand will reach 90% of the Asian GDP and 53% of the global GDP. This will certainly become the drive of a global economic spurt as well. It is indicative that the next two decades will see an enormous increase in the volume of container transportation both in the Indian Ocean and in the Asia Pacific Region. The UK, seeking to reserve its title of a trade empire, will hardly miss such opportunities.

Apart from its economic interests, the UK, for its own purposes, obviously wants to meet the new strategic challenges and risks by an increasingly active participation in securing the trade waterways, establishing order on the sea by carrying out joint maneuvers, including the South China Sea, its possible accession to the Big 4 v. 2.0 and the IORA and strengthening its role in the Indo-Pacific Region (which is underway) in general. It would seem that the events in the Strait of Hormuz, the initiatives on their resolution and the desire to look more self-sufficient could urge the British interest in the region of the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific Region. However, whether or not it will be able to realize them on its own (without its main ally, the US) with an ambitious yet unpredictable Prime Minister is a big question. It is no accident that London recently held a thorough discussion of the insufficient level of the military budget (2%), the Naval Force profile, the merchant fleet, etc., which has on numerous occasions been noted by the New Eastern Outlook. It seems that there are problems requiring debate in the new government and in the Parliament.

Meanwhile, on August 5, the British Foreign Minister Dominic Raab wielded the Big Stick again, stating that he intended to create another (stronger) alliance for ensuring the international law and order and for meeting the
British security challenges. Raab believes that the new alliance would become the answer to “the menacing behavior of Iran and the destabilizing actions of Russia in Europe,” and its member states would counter both “terrorism and climate change,” among other things.

However, is the British stick big enough? Or is the British rhetoric as strong as always?

Nina Lebedeva, Candidate of Historical Sciences, leading research fellow at the Centre of Indian Research, part of the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Oriental Studies, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”