After 47 years in the 28-nation European Union, Britain decided that the alliance was no longer beneficial to it and left the EU, giving the world a new term in the process: “Brexit”. So now, starting January 1, 2021, the UK is no longer allowed to trade with partners outside the European Union under trade agreements previously concluded within the EU. Consequently, in the next couple of years, London will have to individually re-negotiate 759 trade and economic agreements with 168 countries around the world in accordance with WTO rules. This is especially true of former British colonial possessions, many of which are in the South Pacific.

Although the total population of the South Pacific is small, at only about 43 million people (of which 25 million live in Australia, 9 million in Papua New Guinea, 5 million in New Zealand, 0.9 million in Fiji and 0.1-0.5 million each in the other island nations and territories), it is still a good market for Britain with a population of about 67 million.

In the South Pacific region, London is strategically and economically important to the two most financially successful states - Australia and New Zealand, with whom the UK has been actively negotiating a free trade zone since June 2020. Then there are Papua New Guinea and Fiji, the largest island nations, with whom London entered into a “UK-Pacific economic partnership agreement (EPA)” in mid-March 2019, effective January 1, 2021. The EPA is a type of free trade agreement with developing countries, under which all tariffs on goods imported from Fiji and Papua New Guinea are completely eliminated and about 80% of tariffs on UK exports to those countries will gradually be lifted.
According to the estimates, the trade turnover will amount to £369 million a year, especially since trade links have long been established: cane sugar is traditionally sent from Fiji to the UK, and vegetable oils (particularly palm oil) are sent from Papua New Guinea to the UK. Samoa and the Solomon Islands are in line to sign the agreement, and Vanuatu and Tonga may follow. Given that all island nations are rich in fish resources (such as tuna, for instance), these products are also on the list of exports to Great Britain. The former metropole, for its part, sells machinery, medicine and services to South Pacific countries, the latter accounting for the bulk of British exports. To expedite the signing of EPA agreements with island countries in perpetual search of means of support, London emphasizes the desire to increase Official Development Assistance (ODA) to them, and promises large profits from trade.

Interestingly, in early March 2019, the EU blacklisted Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu as tax havens, but that didn’t stop London from signing the aforementioned EPA trade agreement just days later. Also in March 2019, London announced the Pacific Uplift strategy, under which the UK opened offices in Samoa, Vanuatu and Tonga. With British diplomatic representations already in place in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands, the United Kingdom currently has more influence in the region than France, Germany, Taiwan, India, and others. Only Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the United States, and China have more offices in the South Pacific island countries and territories.

It should be mentioned that the South Pacific region is the largest on the planet, with 12 independent island states and 13 dependent territories belonging to Australia, New Zealand, France and the United States. The UK, too, owns a tiny overseas territory in the middle of the Pacific Ocean called the Pitcairn Islands, where only about 50 people live. Nevertheless, Britain has the right to send its warships to the Pacific Ocean. However, it exercised this right for the last time in 2001, transferring authority to patrol the waters of Pitcairn to New Zealand and France, which consider such interaction to be very beneficial for strengthening relations between the three countries.

As for the defense strategies of the major players, i.e. Australia, France, and the United States, in the Pacific, Australia plays the biggest role in the region. As early as January 1944, Australia and New Zealand signed the Canberra Pact, which established a “regional defense zone” covering Australia, New Zealand, and all of the South Pacific islands of Melanesia, a subregion northeast of the Australian continent. Recall that Melanesia is home to the states with which the UK has or is about to enter into EPA trade agreements: Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Tonga.

Looking back two years ago, one can remember how China had already tried to start negotiations with Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Vanuatu on the possible deployment of its military bases in parallel with the implementation of the Chinese trade and economic project “Belt and Road Initiative”, but these attempts were suppressed by the efforts of Australian diplomacy. Moreover, Canberra managed to negotiate with Papua New Guinea and Fiji to strengthen its military presence in their territories. Australia is now more interested than ever in maintaining its influence in the Melanesian “defense zone,” for which British assistance will not be superfluous. Australia has already ordered 12 submarines from France in February 2019, and it is likely not the last of its major defense purchases. Britain, too, has a chance to get involved in strengthening Australian defense. It should be recalled that the UK is increasing its arms exports year on year: in 2019, sales peaked, allowing it to leave behind competitors such as France and Russia and rank second in the world after the United States on the list of leading arms trading countries.

Considering that London is threatening all of Europe with plans to copy the “Singapore miracle” and turn into the so-called “Singapore-on-Thames” by creating an offshore zone, the South Pacific countries have the prospect of building not only trade but also political and even military relations with a complex and rather unpredictable player pursuing its own interests in the region.

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