Returning to Asia: What's Moving Britain?

The convergence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans into a single geostrategic space — the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) — and the growing competition between the major regional players — China and India — have encouraged the involvement of new international actors, including Britain, in IPR affairs. After the country's exit from the European Union in 2020, London is trying to diversify its foreign policy ties, look for new markets, and rebuild relations with states around the world outside the EU dialogue mechanisms.

It should come as no surprise that Britain has directed its commercial, economic and geopolitical interests toward developing relations with the countries of Asia, which have been the engine of global economic growth for the past decades. At the same time, London has not yet formulated its Indo-Pacific strategy, unlike the Netherlands or Germany. For now, the basis for promoting British interests in the post-Brexit era has been the concept of "Global Britain," announced back in 2016 by then-Prime Minister Theresa May. The concept is based on Britain's desire to increase its political and economic weight in the world, as well as to prove the expediency of its exit from the European Union.

Britain's special geopolitical position in the IPR is enabled not only by historical ties, but also by the presence of military bases. Despite its withdrawal from the territories "east of Suez" half a century ago, London's strategy is still focused on increasing the number of its military facilities, logistics hubs and regional defense partners from the Mediterranean to Southeast Asia and Oceania. These facilities include naval bases in Bahrain, the Diego Garcia base in the Indian Ocean (shared with the United States), and military garrisons in Singapore and Brunei.

In the near future, Britain may try to strengthen its naval presence in Oceania, where the unimpeded passage of its
warships is possible thanks to its overseas territory of Pitcairn Island (managed through New Zealand and patrolled by the French Navy), which has a large exclusive economic zone (approximately 830,000 km²) and an advantageous position on trade routes in the South Pacific. The Five Powers' Defense Agreement of 1971 (between Britain, Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Singapore) and other defense and security arrangements between London and Oceania should also be kept in mind, as well as an increase in London's defense spending by $20 billion in 2020.

In recent years Britain has strengthened its naval presence in the IPR. For example, in 2018, China condemned the passage of the British ship HMS Albion through the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea and warned London that such counterproductive actions and attempts to challenge PRC interests could call into question the further work of the two countries to establish a free trade zone. But such warnings cannot dissuade British strategists. In 2019, then-British Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson said that the Global Britain concept required London to "act against countries that trample the law." For this very purpose in 2021 Britain plans to activate its newest aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth, whose area of responsibility is the Pacific Ocean and, presumably, the South China Sea.

As already mentioned, with Britain's withdrawal from the EU, London lost access to dialogue mechanisms around the world, including IPR, and now the British side needs to build new contacts with leading regional actors that correspond to modern realities. It should be noted that Asian countries accounted for 20% of both British exports and imports in 2019. The title of Britain's largest trading partner in Asia belongs to China: in 2019 the trade turnover between the two countries was $111 billion. Britain's trade with the other pillar of the region, India, is $8.8 billion. The basis of Britain's exports to Asia are vehicles, oil and oil products, pharmaceuticals, electrical machinery and equipment, precious metals, etc.

Recently, however, the relationship between Britain and China has been developing (or rather, deteriorating) particularly dramatically, while it is Beijing's position that largely determines the realization of Britain's ambitions to establish trade ties with Asia. On the one hand, China's huge and prestigious market of a billion consumers is a unique chance for London to diversify its trade in the post-Brexit era. On the other hand, the negative ideological-political discourse between the two countries hinders their successful cooperation. In 2019-2021, Britain banned the use of equipment from Chinese telecommunications company Huawei for deploying a 5G network, revoked the broadcasting license of Chinese satellite news channel CGTN, and actively criticized China's actions toward protesters in Hong Kong. All of these actions could negatively affect Britain's interests in Asia.

Since one of London's goals is to rebuild an economy already damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, straining relations with one of the world's most important consumer markets is clearly counterproductive. However, it seems that Britain is not going to turn away from the course of worsening relations with China. Thus, in the turbulent post-Brexit period, London decided to cut supplies from the PRC to get rid of import dependence, and this will further complicate Britain's geo-economic landscape in the region.

To further its interests in the IPR, Britain will be forced to use the mediation of Japan and Australia. In October 2020, Japan has already signed an economic partnership agreement with Britain, while Australia has been negotiating an FTA with Britain since the summer of 2020. In late January 2021, Britain applied for membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, where Japan plays a particularly important role.

At the same time, Australia and Britain are members of the Five Eyes Intelligence Alliance, which is the basis not only for economic but also for intelligence coordination between the two countries. Discussions have been going on for years about the possible inclusion of Japan in this intelligence alliance, so Tokyo's assistance in involving London in the Indo-Pacific Region may not go in vain for the Japanese side.

The past year of 2020 has brought many challenges to Britain, but it has also intensified discussions about its role in the IPR. However, London's return to one of the most dynamic and developing regions of the world is characterized not only by productive economic ties with regional states, but also by attempts to counteract China, which, in fact, only complicates Britain's position in the region.

It is clear that the modern world order is moving away from the American-centric concept, and the alliances and integration associations that have developed over recent decades are not eternal: Britain itself has demonstrated this with its withdrawal from the EU. Therefore, European countries that want to become significant actors in the Indo-Pacific region need a pragmatic and relevant strategy for building ties with all the leading powers of the region without exception.
Petr Konovalov, a political observer, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.