On May 4 this year, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a video summit with his counterpart of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson. This is no ordinary event both in the bilateral relations between the world’s fifth and sixth economies and in the game that is unfolding in the Indo-Pacific region. But before briefly discussing the key results of the talks, let us turn our attention to a number of concomitant circumstances.

First, it should be recalled that this event was originally planned back in late January, when Boris Johnson was to arrive in India as a special guest on the main national holiday “Republic Day”. This was agreed upon by the foreign ministers of both countries, Dominic Raab and Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, during the former’s visit to Delhi in mid-December 2020.

However, three weeks later it was announced that the date of Johnson’s visit to India had been postponed due to a COVID-19-related emergency. This seemed to imply a coronavirus problem in the UK rather than in India, because at that time the latter was coping with COVID-19 fairly well. This was especially noticeable against the background of the catastrophic course of this pandemic in the United States, several countries in Europe and Latin America.

The government of India, the prime minister and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party all scored (again, at the time) big political points, which turned out to be very timely given the sharp aggravation of the internal political situation in
the country due to the large-scale actions of farmers who disagreed with the government’s plan to reform the agricultural sector.

In the author’s view, it was the acute internal political situation in India that was the real reason for the cancellation of the British Prime Minister’s visit. The new date for Boris Johnson’s arrival was revised several times, until near the end of March it was finally clear that the coronavirus disaster was now upon India.

Under these circumstances, holding a direct meeting between the leaders of both countries would be a bad example to the population, which is urged to observe serious social restrictions. That is why the now traditional format of videoconferencing was chosen. The date chosen (May 4) does not seem to be a coincidence for either of the participants.

As for Johnson and the Conservative Party headed by him, the factor of gaining foreign policy points on the eve of the most important event associated with the May 6 elections (the largest in almost 50 years) to local authorities in several counties, as well as to the Scottish and Welsh parliaments, became particularly important. Some kind of positive foreign policy would be a good “addition” to the success in the fight against the same coronavirus epidemic at home.

However, the latter also involved a considerable foreign policy component, since the recent COVID-19 situation in the UK was much better than in the EU countries. From which, mind you, London has recently withdrawn. The emphasis on this circumstance contained a hidden message from the Conservative Party leadership to the voters: “No need to worry! Everything we do is right and forward-thinking, both internally and externally. Vote for us, not the Labor Party or fringe separatists. You can’t go wrong!”

So holding a videosummit with the leader of the former “biggest jewel in the British crown” two days before the election was part of the effort to achieve success in this most important, to repeat, for the Johnson-led government, domestic political action.

However, judging by the preliminary results, the Conservatives’ convincing success in England is completely offset by the majority of seats in the Scottish Parliament won by supporters of a new referendum on its independence.

For the Narendra Modi government and the ruling BJP in India, with the resolution of the acute phase of the conflict with the PRC in Ladakh and a reduction in tensions with Pakistan, the main source of concern has also shifted inside the country. As in the UK, it includes the same two closely related components: the COVID-19 pandemic, whose spread in the country is, to reiterate, catastrophic, and local parliamentary elections in four states plus one union territory. The same “farmer” issue has not disappeared, though.

But for Modi and the BJP, the situation with both of these components (especially the first) looks no less bleak than that of their British counterparts. As for the coronavirus pandemic, from the example for the rest of the world, which India was at the beginning of the year, today it is the subject of universal (including the UK) urgent help with everyone doing whatever they can. The most pressing problem is the shortage of oxygen sources and ventilators in hospitals. This is associated with a sharp increase in mortality among patients with a severe form of the disease.

Under these conditions, trends have emerged (fraught with various and most serious consequences), first, toward a loss of authority for the institution of central government and, second, toward individual states acting “autonomously” from it, as well as from other administrative units of the country.

All the accumulated negativity had an impact on the results of these elections. In the press, most attention is paid to the victory in Tamil Nadu of the center-left party coalition headed by a politician with the surname of Stalin, not exactly common in India (or anywhere else). The leftists in Kerala have reinforced and even strengthened their position.

But most significant and disturbing for the BJP were the results in one of several “difficult” (in various respects) states, West Bengal. Here, the BJP fought most fiercely and deliberately, with party leaders and members of the government, including the prime minister himself. The more painful for the party and the Central Government was the crushing defeat (although success had been predicted) and a particularly impressive victory of the local party led by the charismatic Mamata Banerjee, who has been the state’s chief minister since 2011.

Of incomparably less importance in “quantitative” terms was the defeat of the BJP in the small town of Ayodhya in the north of the country. But it carries with it a symbolism that should alert the current leadership of India. For through its considerable efforts the future main temple of Hinduism is being built there. All support for the latter is
at the heart of the BJP’s views on the preferred cultural and ideological basis for the country’s population. The basis, which, as it turns out, does not overly interest the population. Possibly due to other, much more urgent and acute problems outlined above.

All in all, now is the “right time” for the governments of both India and the UK to engage in the most ambitious foreign policy projects possible. However, this is typical of the ruling “elites” in general, and the example set by the leadership of the world’s leading power: the more acute the situation inside the United States, the greater concern is expressed about the state of affairs (mainly in the areas of “democracy” and “human rights”) outside the country. At such critical moments of history, the “world community” for whatever reason always shows its more delusional side.

London has a lot of problems with the abandoned EU (one would hope that French and UK border patrol boats won’t start a war over the Jersey islands), and the integrity of the country is hanging by a thread. And at this time The UK’s foreign policy is “diverted” to a region on the other side of the globe.

In today’s hectic times, one can hardly predict what will happen at least a year from now. But that did not stop Boris Johnson and Narendra Modi from approving the Joint Statement, which is a “Roadmap to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” by 2030. Even if progress is made in the implementation of the positions outlined in this document (or at least some of them), the movement in accordance with the Roadmap promises a significant increase in the level of comprehensive cooperation between India and the UK.

For parties closely involved in regional processes, Paragraphs 8 and 9, which discuss increasing the level of bilateral cooperation in defense and security in general and the defense industry in particular, may be of particular interest (and caution). There are also (in Paragraph 10) well-established memes that quite clearly address China, though without mentioning it.

Recently, the activation of the EU and the main countries of the Union in the Indian direction has attracted attention. It seems that together and separately they decided to move in the direction indicated, a course parallel to the British one.

It’s so hard to keep up with these Europeans. Can the British even be considered Europeans anymore? Aren’t the “traditional” European skeletons, locked in a closet for 75 years, starting to stretch their numb bones?

As for India, its “European Year 2021” can be seen as compensating for the process of slowing down the development of relations with the main country of the (more and more notional by the day) “West” represented by the United States. Apparently, Delhi saw this second trend as the necessary price to be paid for reducing tensions (which have reached dangerous levels) with its great neighbor, China. The latter has certain grievances against both Europeans and especially the British, but certainly not on the same scale as the United States.

Lastly, it should be stressed once again that the geopolitical plans of recent times are built in the context of aggravation of the situation within all the leading world players. This could render those plans meaningless.

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