The term “tilt” that stands for UK’s need to double down on the Indo-Pacific region (IPR) in general and China in particular in terms of foreign policy, was first used in late 2020 in a Chatham House research. This research was conducted on the eve of (a long-drawn-out) ending UK’s push to leave EU when one question was becoming increasingly urgent: “What will happen next?”

The above-mentioned work by one of the leading British think tanks had some effect on the government document (also featuring the prime-minister’s extensive foreword article) ambitiously dubbed “Global Britain in a Competitive Age”. This article appeared four months later. In this visionary document, the issue of a tilt (the term itself, however, was not used) is pretty much present.

Sidestepping not an idle question (why should the UK in its present condition care about what is going on the other side of the globe), an apparent tilt in the same direction within the nation’s political practice should be noted. This tilt, now pretty multifaceted, became evident when the UK government announced (in March 2017) the start of Brexit. Six months later, then-PM Theresa May made a landmark visit to Japan. At the same time, Elizabeth “Liz” Truss, the head of the newly established Department for International Trade and now UK Foreign Secretary, also stepped up her activity in the IPR.
She orchestrated to a great extent the launch of the UK’s ascension to the regional organization CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) that for now includes 11 Asian and American countries, with Japan being the unofficial leader. It is understood, that this process is now at its final stage. Its successful completion was apparently capped by the signing (by the same Elizabeth Truss and then-Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan Toshimitsu Motegi) of a bilateral UK-Japan free trade agreement.

In mid-December of last year, a similar agreement was concluded with Australia that is subject to subsequent ratification by the parliaments of both countries. There have also been reports about probing talks on the same agenda with India.

And yet, against the backdrop of debates in the UK on the practical significance of the trade and economic component of the tilt in question (particularly, its ability to offset Brexit ramifications), a defense and security component deserves to be highlighted. This component was the key issue raised during the talks between Theresa May with then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe that were held in the course of the above-mentioned visit.

Three months later (in December 2017), the agreements reached by the prime-ministers were spelled out in detail at ministerial level talks within the so called 2 + 2 format. The next similar 2 + 2 meeting took place in February 2021 as the stemming from it Joint Statement was pretty specific (especially in the Regional affairs section) about the main source of concern for both countries which China is swelling itself into. Directly or implicitly, the set of conventional among Western “gentlemen” grievances that encompasses certain issues outside and within the Chinese territory, was delivered to China.

There was room, of course, for expressing discontent regarding the situation the much-vaunted “Russian politician” Alexei Navalny got mixed up into. His name has been mentioned in the connection with the non-proliferation of chemical weapons and its use.

The line about the need of “reforming” the UN as a whole and (“early”) reform of the UN Security Council also grabbed the attention. At the same time, the UK voiced its support for Japan’s claim to become permanent member of the UNSC.

Among the various practical measures of bilateral defense cooperation, the document made a reference to the planned visit by the state-of-the-art aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth and her Carrier Strike Group to the East Asia sub-region. The key element of the protracted (seven-months long) trip of the group that started in May 2021 was the joint exercises with the Japanese Navy, with both fleets demonstratively sailing through the Taiwan Strait on the way home.

The UK’s strengthening positions in the region are further enhanced by the formation of a new configuration AUKUS comprising also the US and Australia. The development of defense and security cooperation with the latter was discussed during the same 2 + 2 format, the first-ever such meeting in the bilateral relations, that took place offline (a rare sight for these times) in Sydney on 21 January.

The Joint Statement that was drawn up as a result of this event basically reaffirms everything that the United States, the UK, Japan, Australia had been recently prone to highlight in the bilateral documents regarding the Indo-Pacific. The statement regarding “the alignment of QUAD configuration (which includes the US, Japan, India and Australia) with many of the UK’s Indo-Pacific priorities”, also caught the author’s eye. Broadly speaking, so far this configuration has not showcased its defense and security potential, and it is unclear what will happen next.

Equally remarkable is Australia’s formalized commitment to permanently support the deployment of two UK patrol vessels that would contribute to it “re-establishing” an Indo-Pacific naval presence. These vessels will be largely undertaking “maritime domain awareness activities in the Pacific”. The increasingly noticeable and diverse ingress by China into these “domains” in recent years is raising red flags both in the United States and in Australia. The same worries have now been sparked in the UK.

French regional presence is becoming equally visible. Earlier NEO noted that France had put an increased focus on India. Especially in such delicate sphere as procuring Delhi with advanced weaponry (fighter jets, submarines). When French Defense Minister Florence Parly visited India in September 2020, some statements were made that China was not really happy about. Especially considering that those statements were made on India’s border with China that at the same time (summer 2020) was facing a dangerous escalation.

It is also unlikely that Beijing was excited by the multilateral joint naval exercises that took place from 11 to 16 May 2021 off the Japanese coast with the participation of naval group Jeanne d’Arc (including a Mistral-class amphibious
assault ship and a La Fayette-class frigate). The drill was based on the scenario of parrying the threat of an “unexpected landing by enemy troops on remote islands.”

The author would like to recall that the last two words represent a Japanese euphemism designating five uninhabited Senkaku islands in the East China Sea. Those islands are de-facto controlled by Japan but disputed by China which calls them Diaoyu Dao.

In recent years, Diaoyu Dao/Senkaku islands saw an increase in various incidents with the involvement of Japanese and Chinese coast guard ships. Meanwhile, during the regular (online) session of the Japanese-French format 2 + 2 that took place on 20 January those drills were touted as one the most significant exercises that shape the bilateral defense and security cooperation.

In other words, France signals its presence in IPR zones, a touchy subject in the relations between the leading Asian countries. Why France needs all of this remains unclear. No less puzzling is the similar activity by the UK. Nonetheless, it does not seem that both European countries are so bored that they started looking for trouble on the other side of the globe.

For the current global political lunacy is an abundant source of concerns even without this additional initiative.

*Vladimir Terekhov, expert on the issues of the Asia-Pacific region, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*