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A NEW ROLE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM UNDER PRIME MINISTER RISHI SUNAK

Implications for Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Islands Countries¹

ABSTRACT: The key to the United Kingdom's global role after Brexit was an international tilt towards the Indo-Pacific. In foreign and security policies, it was considered essential to build or reinforce strategic ties with like-minded regional partners, such as Australia and New Zealand, as well as the Pacific Islands Countries ('PICs') that are members of the Commonwealth. Achieving the position of Global Britain through engaged presence in the region was hindered by the consequences of Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine. Rishi Sunak's government has prioritized relations with European countries, at the same time attempting to remain a leading Euro-Atlantic power. The purpose of this article is to analyze the post-global foreign policy of the United Kingdom in view of the 'new normal' signaled in the Integrated Review Refresh and what it means for relations with the indicated countries of the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: United Kingdom, Rishi Sunak, Indo-Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, Commonwealth, Integrated Review Refresh

INTRODUCTION

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) was an impulse for developing a comprehensive vision of the future based on the UK's values, goals, and interests. The new strategy was presented in the Integrated Review

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published in March 2021, which had been announced by Prime Minister Boris Johnson a year before as the most extensive review of British foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Entitled *Global Britain in a competitive age*, it was a clear signal of a departure from the previous policy. It also pointed to the Indo-Pacific as a region of crucial importance for the British economy and security and, in the future, the basis of prosperity of the British.² As the main arena of competition for influence between the global powers, the Indo-Pacific has become a central element of the United Kingdom's global foreign policy.

The critical importance given to engaging in closer cooperation with regional partners, primarily in the area of trade, but also security and defense, reflected the way in which the United Kingdom carried out, after 2021, its strategy of the 'broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific' in order to achieve the status of a 'European country with global interests.'³ The global dimension of thinking about the UK's role was easily noticeable, especially in terms of collective security and the maintenance of international order. The dominant views concerning the changes occurring in the international surroundings of the United Kingdom were not without impact on the rhetoric used. Fundamental importance was given to the concept of Global Britain, which assumed the implementation of far-reaching and ambitious plans.

From this point of view, the July 2023 consent of the members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) to United Kingdom's accession to the Partnership should be seen as an unquestionable success. This means that, in 2024, the UK will become the first new member of this trade organization of Asian and Pacific countries since its establishment in 2018 and, at the same time, the only European member.⁴ The United Kingdom being formally named an ASEAN Dialogue Partner in August 2021 should be perceived in similar categories. The importance of this achievement is confirmed by the fact that ASEAN elevated its relations with the United Kingdom to a level that has not been achieved by any other country in the last 25 years.⁵

In the Integrated Review Refresh 2023, entitled *Responding to a more contested and volatile world*, which was published under the new Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, the

² HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, March 2021, p. 6, at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60644e4bd3bf7f0c91eababd/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf, 10 January 2024.

³ Ibid., pp. 60, 66.

⁴ D. Webb, "The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)," *House of Commons Library*, 11 January 2024, at <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9121/>, 11 January 2024.

⁵ The basis for deepening the relations between the United Kingdom and ASEAN is the implementation of the 2022-2026 Plan of Action (POA): "Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-United Kingdom Dialogue Partnership (2022 to 2026)," *Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office*, 4 August 2022, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asean-uk-dialogue-partnership-plan-of-action-2022-to-2026/plan-of-action-to-implement-the-asean-united-kingdom-dialogue-partnership-2022-to-2026>, 11 January 2024.

term 'Global Britain' is no longer used. However, moving to the 'new normal', with a clear change in rhetoric versus the original version of the document, is still accompanied by a belief that the United Kingdom needs to play an active role in the international arena.⁶

This article has two fundamental research goals. The first one is to discuss the conceptual bases of the United Kingdom's post-global foreign policy in view of the 'new normal' signaled in the updated version of the Integrated Review. The purpose is to evaluate the interests and goals of British foreign and security policy from the point of view of whether this is a continuation or a modification of the direction adopted following Brexit. The other goal is to ponder the consequences of the greater realism of Prime Minister Sunak's government for the international role of the United Kingdom. The analysis covers partnerships with Australia and New Zealand as the key countries of the Anglosphere and the relations with members of the Commonwealth in the South Pacific. The question of the future cooperation with Indo-Pacific countries from the point of view of British interest in this region remains an important but insufficiently researched problem in the literature of the subject.

The research questions posed in this article primarily concern the issue of whether and to what extent the latest change of government in London has resulted in a redefinition of the British concept of foreign policy. The second research question is why did the cabinet of Rishi Sunak decide to abandon the idea of Global Britain that was the leading theme of the globally-oriented British policy? Another fundamental question is what the suggested 'new normal' could mean for the further development of relations with countries of the Indo-Pacific.

The above research questions formed the basis for the formulation of three hypotheses.

The point of departure for the first of these is the claim that the assumption of the post of Prime Minister by Rishi Sunak has resulted in the largest redefinition of the British concept of foreign policy since Brexit. The second hypothesis is that Prime Minister Sunak's pragmatic approach on the grounds of a post-global foreign policy has allowed the United Kingdom's re-engagement in Europe as a clearly defined Euro-Atlantic power. The third hypothesis assumes that the 'new normal', understood as making policy objectives more realistic, will consist of deepening cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region in those areas and with those countries where the United Kingdom is in a position to actually have an impact, thus mainly with the Anglosphere.

The research problem and objectives determined the methodology used. In the article, a method based on a critical analysis of the existing academic literature as well as the historical-descriptive method to provide a historical overview of the governmental actions after Brexit are employed. Furthermore, comparative analysis in international research and legal analysis are also important research tools.

⁶ HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World*, March 2023, p. 22, at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/641d72f45155a2000c6ad5d5/11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf, 12 January 2024.

DEPARTURE FROM GLOBAL BRITAIN: PRIORITIES OF BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY UNDER RISHI SUNAK

The new, post-Brexit strategic approach consisted in initiating deeper relations with allies and partners in the ‘dynamic parts of the world’.⁷ These parts primarily included the Indo-Pacific, a region where Global Britain was to attempt to continue its engagement, supporting regional prosperity and stability, with emphasis placed on closer co-operation in terms of diplomacy, commerce, and defense. This reorientation of British policy was not complete in the sense that, in the 2021 Integrated Review, strengthening the security of the immediate neighborhood was named an indispensable element of the foreign and security policy of Boris Johnson’s government. The United Kingdom remained rooted in the Euro-Atlantic area, with NATO considered as the priority of its defense policy and the USA being the strategic ally and partner.

This confirms that the change of policy did not mean abandoning the foundations of British foreign and security policy.⁸ Keeping the post-Cold-War status quo generated a number of benefits for the United Kingdom, but could not be continued any more. Considering increasing systemic competition, a change of values in terms of international links, and an increase in threats for societies like the British one — open and believing in democratic values — the required security level could only be guaranteed by moving from the position of a defender of an international rules-based system to the role of an active entity that is involved in creating the new rules of the game.

Boris Johnson never denied that the goals of the UK were ambitious. In spite of that, he believed that the perspectives remained optimistic until 2030, considering the numerous assets in the areas of defense and security, science and technology, diplomacy and development, as well as the status of the United Kingdom as a soft power and a leader in areas such as cybernetics and climate change.⁹ All of this justified the intention to retain the status of one of the most influential countries in the world, whose unquestionable leadership was to define the international engagement of the British in the next decade.

In fact, the first symptoms of narrowing down the adopted focus on possibilities of exerting influence in view of global challenges were noticeable already in the speeches and statements of government officials made in 2020 and 2021. This was because, in practice, the scale and multitude of challenges the United Kingdom faced in connection with the concept of Global Britain were immensely difficult to handle. The tilt towards the Indo-Pacific was therefore actually focused on two areas: the Euro-Atlantic area and the English-speaking world, or the Anglosphere. This was a consequence of

⁷ HM Government, *Global Britain...*, p. 14.

⁸ In this context, another foundation should be mentioned: the United Kingdom’s special attachment to the balance of power in Europe. In each individual case, this resulted in taking actions in response to a threat to this order: Ł. Danel, “Demokracja brytyjska w obliczu Brexitu i ewentualnej dekompozycji Zjednoczonego Królestwa,” in J. Kornaś, Ł. Danel (eds), *Demokracja współczesna. Wymiar polski i międzynarodowy*, Toruń 2016, p. 404.

⁹ HM Government, *Global Britain...*, pp. 8-9.

the fact that, traditionally, both these regions were the main arenas of the UK's priorities in terms of defense and security.¹⁰

Officially, the rhetoric of the United Kingdom's global engagement was continued. The pride in the role played and the opportunity to adopt a special perspective of a nation looking outwards could be seen in official statements by Liz Truss. While serving as Foreign Secretary, she emphasized the ability of the United Kingdom to achieve the status of a global power that *plants its flag on the world stage*.¹¹ When she became Prime Minister, it was believed that this was related to the modifications to the framework of Boris Johnson's grand strategy that had been announced. To a growing extent, British decision-makers focused on internal issues, which led to a more cautious approach to the idea of Global Britain. The center of gravity started to move towards Europe and the strengthening of hard power resources, which remained in stark contrast with the status of the 'soft power superpower' emphasized in the Integrated Review.

However, the rhetoric of Global Britain was continued to a certain degree. Prime Minister Truss is said to be the author of the concept of a 'network of liberty' providing a framework for projecting both soft and hard power in the region. This built on the idea of using the United Kingdom's leadership in the G7 in order to expand it into the D-10 (ten democratic states) by adding Australia, India, and South Korea.¹² It is no coincidence that the potential new members are the leading Indo-Pacific democracies. The role of the UK as the architect of a new format of cooperation between the countries of the Euro-Atlantic area reflected the strategic approach to activity in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, it showed the evolving approach of the United Kingdom towards China, which was referred to as the 'biggest threat to the UK's economic security'.¹³

The record short time when Liz Truss was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom could be defined as a bridge towards a normalization of British foreign policy. This process was further developed under Rishi Sunak, who took over during a period of high internal instability and changes in the international environment. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, resulting, among others, in a global energy crisis, made this environment far different than the conditions in which the predecessors of the incumbent Prime Minister operated. Considering all of these factors, as well as the way in which the national interest was perceived by the several governments that existed over less than two months in 2022, it could be claimed that post-Brexit British foreign policy covers two stages of development. The first one, between 2020 and 2022, was a period of rejecting any form of coordinated cooperation with the EU, which was not treated

¹⁰ K. Haugevik, Ø. Svendsen, "On Safer Ground? The Emergence and Evolution of 'Global Britain,'" *International Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 6 (2023), p. 2400.

¹¹ L. Truss, "Global Britain Is Planting Its Flag on the World Stage," *The Telegraph*, 18 September 2021, at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/09/18/global-britain-planting-flag-world-stage/>, 13 January 2024.

¹² J. Rogers, "Time for the D10 to Replace the G7?," *The Strategist*, 16 June 2020, at <https://www.aspi-strategist.org.au/time-for-the-d10-to-replace-the-g7/>, 13 January 2024.

¹³ HM Government, *Global Britain...*, p. 62.

as a partner. The second one started in 2022 and still continues with Brexit considered a closed chapter in the history of the United Kingdom. This stage sees more and more cooperation with the EU.

Importantly, in the entire 2021 Integrated Review, which is a reflection of British strategy in terms of foreign, defense, and security policy, the term Brexit does not appear even once. Similarly, a departure from the previous expansive rhetoric and a shift towards a completely new narration are two characteristic features of the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh. Rishi Sunak's cabinet initiated a stage of reducing the number of references to Global Britain, opting instead for a pragmatic approach. This approach consists in narrowing down conflict areas, at the same time expanding the existing planes of cooperation.

According to this approach, the United Kingdom strives to cooperate not only with its western partners, who share its values and democratic norms. As pointed out in the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh, the UK is attempting to work out a shared approach to China with its closest allies and partners, which are specified to be both European and Indo-Pacific countries. This evolution of the approach, and in fact an update of it, is intended to respond to the challenge that is China's role in the international order. The British attitude shows clear signs of pragmatism, manifested in an openness and a will to build constructive relations with China, provided that this is in line with British national interest. The basis for the redefined policy of the United Kingdom towards China is, on the one hand, the awareness of the UK's economic dependence on the Chinese partner and, on the other hand, the wish to avoid a deterioration of trade and investment relations with China.¹⁴

Unlike Boris Johnson, Rishi Sunak has decided not to distance himself from the European Union and other European countries; quite the contrary, he has opted to cooperate with them. The United Kingdom intends to make a major contribution to strengthening the European security architecture, especially in Northern Europe. Simultaneously to the publication of the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh, Prime Minister Sunak announced an increase in defense expenditures of £5 billion over two years in an attempt to reach, in the long run, the goal of assigning 2.5% of GDP on defense.¹⁵ One issue that had already been accented by the government of Liz Truss and was elevated to the rank of a major strategic goal in the Integrated Review Refresh is a high level of diplomatic and military support for Ukraine.¹⁶

The 2023 document abandons the previously promoted tilt of Global Britain towards the Indo-Pacific; instead, key importance is given to reinforcing this tilt through a network of Atlantic-Pacific partnerships. Already in his first speech as Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak emphasized the sea, referring to one of the goals of British diplomacy:

¹⁴ HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023...*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁵ The defense budget is to be increased by £5 billion by 2025. The long-term goal is to maintain defense spending at the level of 2.5% of GDP; see N. von Ondarza, D. Rehbaum, "From 'Global Britain' to Realpolitik: The Updated Integrated Review," *SWP Comment*, no. 24 (2023), p. 5.

¹⁶ The expenses in this respect, which amounted to £2.3 billion in 2022/2023, are to be maintained at this level; HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023...*, p. 11.

an attempt to build a foundation for continued European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. In the Integrated Review Refresh, the adoption of an integrated approach to naval security, environment, and trade is pointed out. The United Kingdom wants to be perceived as a Euro-Atlantic naval power, carrying out its ambitions in terms of trade and diplomacy and achieving a military advantage on the sea by building its presence in the Indo-Pacific, improving interoperability, and cooperating with American and Australian forces.¹⁷

An approach where the importance of the sea and naval supremacy is emphasized is nothing new. It is in fact a case of going back to the roots - in the second half of the 20th century, it was emphasized that the British are not a *continental nation*, but an *island power having a Colonial Empire*.¹⁸ In the past, this fact predestined the United Kingdom to play a special role in the international arena; today, it is assumed that the UK, as a modern naval power, should make it a priority to bring together the two regions crucial from the point of view of security and prosperity: the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹

In the opinion of the Sunak's government, making the Indo-Pacific a lasting pillar of British internal policy was indispensable for ensuring a stable naval order. However, it is a major challenge, especially as the cabinet of Rishi Sunak had been gradually reducing its 'imperial ambitions' down to utilizing Brexit to the maximum extent. The government was clearly departing from Boris Johnson's policy, *de facto* getting rid of the Department for International Trade, which was formed in July 2016, i.e., just after Theresa May became Prime Minister, and was considered crucial just a few years ago. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was questioning the number of and the speed of signing free trade agreements with overseas countries. Importantly, this criticism includes, on account of the rush and the unilateral nature, the agreements signed with Australia and New Zealand. At the same time, the government was sending a clear message that the signing of major trade agreements is no longer a priority, unlike making the United Kingdom 'the undisputed top investment destination in Europe'²⁰ by focusing on internal matters.

Remaining a European power, although 'engaged globally', the United Kingdom under the Prime Minister Sunak abandoned a high level of ambition, adopting a more pragmatic approach to cooperation. The UK is striving to rebuild its reputation and

¹⁷ House of Lords, *UK Defence Policy: From Aspiration to Reality? 1st Report of Session 2022-23*, London 2023, p. 33, at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5803/ldselect/ldintrel/124/124.pdf>, 15 January 2024.

¹⁸ K.O. Morgan, *Britain since 1945: The People's Peace*, Oxford–New York 2001, p. 134.

¹⁹ A. Patalano, "Sunak Sets the Course for Britain's Foreign Policy in a Maritime Century," *UK in a Changing Europe*, 9 December 2022, at <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/sunak-sets-the-course-for-britains-foreign-policy-in-a-maritime-century/>, 16 January 2024.

²⁰ Quoted from S. Boscia, S. Whale, "Rishi Sunak Waves Goodbye to Boris Johnson's Global Britain Era," *Politico*, 7 February 2023, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/rishi-sunak-boris-johnson-global-britain-reshuffle-post-brexite/>, 15 January 2024.

strengthen its status on the basis of the four pillars of its updated strategic framework.²¹ There remains the fundamental question of what a complete abandonment of the Global Britain framework and the emergence of the 'new normal' could mean in the context of building long-term foundations for strategic relations between the UK and the Indo-Pacific countries.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM'S POST-GLOBAL POLICY FOR AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

By the middle of the 20th century, key importance was being given to the English-speaking world, covering the United Kingdom, the British dominions, and the United States. The then leader of the Conservative Party, Winston Churchill, referred in his 1948 speech to a concept of *three majestic circles*. According to this vision of the world, the English-speaking world constituted a significant area of the UK's activity, in addition to the British Commonwealth and Empire and United Europe.²² It should be emphasized that the United Kingdom valued the world built around the British Empire highly, believing that it had a special role in shaping its own identity and even uniqueness. This translated to how the national interest, and the roles played in the international arena by the UK were formulated.

This redefinition of the direction of British foreign policy is rooted in the concept of Anglosphere, not new but revived in the 1990s, and invoked especially in the context of Brexit. Taking into account the geographical scope and the degree of institutionalization, three basic models of the Anglosphere can be distinguished.²³ The first one, defined as the 'empire' model, includes the United States and the area of the British empire in the mid-20th century. The second model, called the 'settler colonial model', refers to the United Kingdom and a select group of former British settler colonies, including Australia, Canada and New Zealand, with the possibility of including other countries (such as India). The third model, referred to as the 'imperial federal model', applies to the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. With regard to the degree of institutionalization, supporters of each of these models represent diverse positions: from loose unions to a federal or confederal association.

The last of the above-mentioned models forms the basis for discussion of CANZUK, understood as a loose association of four countries having multiple ties between

²¹ These are pillar 1 (shape the international environment), pillar 2 (deter, defend, and compete across all domains), pillar 3 (address vulnerabilities through resilience), and pillar 4 (generate strategic advantage); for more, see HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023...*, p. 16.

²² A. Hadfield, R.G. Whitman, "The Diplomacy of 'Global Britain': Settling, Safeguarding and Seeking Status," *International Politics* (2023).

²³ D. Bell, S. Vucetic, "Brexit, CANZUK, and the Legacy of Empire," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2019), pp. 367-382.

them, not only political ones.²⁴ This exclusion of the United States makes CANZUK, as an exclusive concept of the Anglosphere, the most feasible in this variant. Post-Brexit revitalization of CANZUK as the first stage on the path towards a fully functional Anglosphere played an important role in the context of the efforts made to ensure that the United Kingdom remains a global leader after leaving the EU²⁵.

The partnerships with Australia and New Zealand were given a major role in the context of Global Britain's place in the world. In the 2021 Integrated Review, it was announced that cooperation in terms of foreign, defense, and security policy would be continued. Key importance was given to the implementation of new bilateral free trade agreements with the 'core' Anglosphere states, reflecting the UK's intention to rebuild a similar number of trade agreements and resulting preferences pre-Brexit. Attention was also given to strengthening multilateral relations through the already functioning regional forms of cooperation, such as the Five Powers Defense Arrangements (FPDA), the Pacific Islands Forum, or ASEAN. The use of such forums, whose structure is looser than the structure of the EU, was an element of a considered diplomatic strategy allowing for achieving, more quickly, a significant impact on the decisions being worked out.

The vision of the United Kingdom engaging in collective activities and following a constructive, multi-directional path in international cooperation after Brexit was expressed in the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh. It was emphasized that the UK has given priority to the Indo-Pacific, which is a challenge in view of having fewer resources in a region that is geographically more remote than the Euro-Atlantic. As a result, it becomes necessary to start cooperation via partners and institutions and to build deep relations based on the existing economic, technological, and security-related ties.²⁶

In line with the above, partnerships with Australia and New Zealand were defined as being among the closest ones. In terms of trade, a new foundation was laid in the form of bilateral free trade agreements, executed in 2021 and 2022. These were the first post-Brexit fully negotiated agreements with major economies of the Commonwealth. In 2022, the value of bilateral trade with Australia and New Zealand amounted to £17.6 billion; the value of direct foreign investment from Australia and New Zealand in the United Kingdom reached £16.6 billion, while the UK's investment in these two countries was £42.1 billion. The trade agreements were based on abolishing customs duties for the vast majority of goods, removing barriers to compliance with the existing regulations, and cooperation in terms of digital commerce and sales of goods in

²⁴ According to this vision, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK, as "natural allies," would introduce mutual facilitations concerning migration, intensify defense and trade cooperation, and reinforce strategic ties based on an intelligence alliance known as the Five Eyes Alliance (FVEY); M. Giannangeli, "Britain's Plan for Post-Brexit Union with Canada, Australia and New Zealand REVEALED," *Express*, 2 February 2020, at <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1236734/brexit-news-uk-trade-union-canada-australia-new-zealand-Erin-O-Toole-Canzuk-plan>, 17 January 2024.

²⁵ J. Szczepański, "Remarks on CANZUK': Theoretical and Methodological Perspective of Research on the Post-Brexit Anglosphere," *Polish Journal of Political Science*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2020), pp. 15-16.

²⁶ HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023...*, p. 24.

the form of electronic commerce, with plans to lay a foundation for ecological trade. Having such a broad framework for cooperation in terms of trade builds potential for future benefits.²⁷

According to the assumptions, further development of mutual trade and investment relations is to lead to the ratification of the United Kingdom's accession to the CPTPP. For the UK, the fact that Australia and New Zealand are Indo-Pacific countries also matters. This is because this region has been recording, globally, the highest increase in British goods and services, expected to continue at least until 2030. For this purpose, a number of profits are expected to be achieved through the Department of Business and Trade, and specifically the Preference Utilization Unit. The Unit is tasked with close cooperation with business in order to maximize the new trade preferences and increase the export of goods and services to Australia and New Zealand.

In the areas of defense and security, an example of strengthening one of the closest British partnerships, reinforcing the Indo-Pacific tilt, was the trilateral AUKUS of September 2021. It was fully in line with the Global Britain concept, even though initially it damaged British-French relations, sparking a major diplomatic dispute between the governments of Australia and France.²⁸ It also produced various responses from the countries of Southeast Asia; some of them feared an escalation of regional tensions and a nuclear arms race, provoking other countries to engage in aggressive actions, including China's actions in the disputed South China Sea. The key to understanding the unique approach of the countries of Southeast Asia is to realize their post-colonial sensitivity to any initiatives started by other powers in order to play a major role in their region. This is significant in view of the efficiency of the current and future efforts to build the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific naval area, which are being made by the United Kingdom and Australia.²⁹

Their joint engagement reflects the UK's intention of long-term participation in cooperation with the Indo-Pacific countries in the areas of defense and security. The UK's contribution is to take the form of a new, multilateral network of Atlantic-Pacific partnerships, which the current government perceives as a bridge between the priority areas of interest of the United Kingdom. This point of view suggests a network

²⁷ By 2025, the trade agreement with Australia could generate £2.3 billion annually for the British economy, while the trade agreement with New Zealand could bring £0.8 billion; "New Opportunities for Trade and Investment with Australia and New Zealand Trade Deals," *British Chambers of Commerce*, 30 May 2023, at <https://www.britishchambers.org.uk/news/2023/05/new-opportunities-for-trade-and-investment-with-australia-and-new-zealand-trade-deals/>, 18 January 2024.

²⁸ One of the most important decisions taken to strengthen bilateral cooperation was to establish the Anglo-French Carrier Strike Group, with the United Kingdom being responsible for deploying it in the Indo-Pacific; S. Nagata, "From Global Britain to Atlantic-Pacific: The United Kingdom's Indo-Pacific Policy under the Integrated Review Refresh 2023," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 5 (2023), pp. 148-149.

²⁹ Importantly, just a month after the inauguration of AUKUS, Australia's relations with ASEAN were elevated to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership; H. Le Thu, B. Hogeveen, "UK, Australia and ASEAN Cooperation for Safer Seas: A Case for Elevating the Cyber-Maritime Security Nexus," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 31 March 2022, pp. 13-14.

approach based on a realistic assessment of the assets of the United Kingdom as an influential player in the arena of European security, combined with acceptance of the UK's own limitations resulting from its peripheral geographical location in relation to the Indo-Pacific.³⁰

With respect to continued engagement in ensuring the security of this region, Rishi Sunak sent a clear message by making AUKUS the key pillar of the Atlantic-Pacific network. According to the Integrated Review Refresh, the Australia-United Kingdom-USA partnership was to be moved to the implementation stage by equipping Australia with conventionally-armed nuclear-powered submarines by the beginning of the 2030s.³¹ Increased cooperation in terms of advanced military capabilities assumed additional financing of nearly £3 billion for nuclear deterrence, including as part of AUKUS activities.³²

The United Kingdom opts for the development of capabilities that will cement transatlantic ties and, more importantly, reinforce its own position in NATO. From the outset, Prime Minister Sunak's pragmatic approach has been based on an assumption of supporting cooperation in Europe in combination with a conscious utilization of the capabilities resulting from the reinforcement of deep and long-term partnerships with like-minded allies in the Indo-Pacific.³³ Considering the mutual benefits offered by the acceptance of the British offer by members of the Indo-Pacific network, major importance was given to the Anglosphere. This is reflected by the long-standing cooperation within the Five Eyes Alliance, defined as one of the core elements of the Anglosphere, whose mission is to exchange intelligence information; further expansion of cooperation in the areas of defense and security is planned.

This alliance is a lasting foundation for the new security network, AUKUS. The prospect of New Zealand joining this partnership is becoming increasingly real. Moreover, this move is fully approved by the supporters of revitalizing the CAN-ZUK concept, who hope that this initiative will get the interest of not one, but two English-speaking partners: New Zealand and Canada. Even though the military relations between the members of AUKUS and New Zealand have been full of contradictions, the prospect of the smallest Five Eyes Alliance member joining AUKUS is now real. However, the planned cooperation is to concern exclusively the second pillar of

³⁰ J. Gaskarth, "Strategy, Tactics and Tilts: A Networked Approach to UK Influence in the Indo-Pacific," *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 167, no. 6-7 (2023), p. 20.

³¹ G. Bal, "Sunak's Effect on Britain's Foreign Policy," *Ankara Center for Crisis and Policy Studies*, 4 April 2023, at <https://www.ankasam.org/sunaks-effect-on-britains-foreign-policy/?lang=en>, 6 February 2024.

³² N. von Ondarza, D. Rehbaum, "From 'Global Britain' to Realpolitik...", p. 5.

³³ Prime Minister's Office, Sunak R., "PM Speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet: 28 November 2022," *gov.uk*, 28 November 2022, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-to-the-lord-mayors-banquet-28-november-2022>, 6 February 2024.

cooperation, i.e., sharing advanced military technology, excluding New Zealand from the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines.³⁴

IMPLICATIONS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM'S POST-GLOBAL POLICY FOR MEMBERS OF THE COMMONWEALTH IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

During the debates concerning the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU, the Commonwealth was an important point of reference. Brexit supporters, headed by Boris Johnson, emphasized the importance of the traditionally strong ties based on historical and cultural reasons (including a shared language and deep-rooted values), interpersonal relations, and trade links between the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth member countries. According to Anglosphere supporters, this engagement was fueled by the desire to rejuvenate the Commonwealth.³⁵ Importantly, Commonwealth countries did not express their approval or disapproval for the withdrawal from the EU and did not state whether they considered this to be the right move for their former metropolis. However, in general, they were skeptical of Brexit, fearing a negative impact of this process on their own relations with the EU. They also expressed some concern about the negative impact of new trade agreements with the UK on their own economies. In addition to that, they protested against any attempts by the UK to play the role of a leader within the Commonwealth, which was referred to as vision 'Empire 2.0'.³⁶

The concept of increasing military presence 'east of Suez'³⁷ was a clear reference to Global Britain's ambitions of being a world power. Beyond the wish to find a place for itself in the world, the United Kingdom wanted to once again be present in the regions in which it was engaged during the heyday of its former empire and to focus on the partners with which trade and diplomatic relations had been weakened, especially after the UK joined the European Communities in 1973. This was a consequence of the British belief that the United Kingdom is still a global power and does well outside of

³⁴ M. Knott, "New Zealand Moves Closer to Being Included in Part of AUKUS Partnership," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 February 2024, at <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/new-zealand-moves-closer-to-being-included-in-part-of-aukus-partnership-20240201-p5f1qr.html>, 8 February 2024.

³⁵ A. Mycock, B. Wellings, "The Anglosphere: Past, Present and Future," *British Academy Review* (2017), p. 44.

³⁶ K. Opermann, R. Beasley, J. Kaarbo, "British Foreign Policy after Brexit: Losing Europe and Finding a Role," *International Relations*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2019), p. 11.

³⁷ The belief that it is reasonable to have large military garrisons in both these areas started to wane in the 1960s, when a review of the UK's global commitments was initiated. The British realized the imbalance between the scale of the resources involved in maintaining these bases and the disproportionately low profits achieved on this account; W. James, "There and Back Again: The Fall and Rise of Britain's 'East of Suez' Basing Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, 18 February 2021, at <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/there-and-back-again-the-fall-and-rise-of-britains-east-of-suez-basing-strategy/>, 20 January 2024.

the EU. The post-Brexit redefinition of the UK turned out to be a particularly strong incentive to develop, but also refresh, various forms of multilateral engagement in the international arena, including within an organization as unique as the Commonwealth.

In the 2021 Integrated Review, the Commonwealth was called an *important institution supporting an open and resilient international order*. The UK was seen as capable of leading a group of countries whose national interest was to promote democracy and the freedom of individuals, powering sustainable development and cross-border trade in goods and services, which is important especially when it comes to supporting economic growth.³⁸ The UK emphasized the importance of reviving trade relations with members of the Commonwealth, striving to strengthen and transform this organization into a center of wider diplomatic and economic relations.

For most of the small member countries of the Commonwealth,³⁹ the United Kingdom remains a very important market and a major trade partner. However, these relations are clearly asymmetrical. In the case of some countries, such as Botswana, the Seychelles, or Belize, the condition of the United Kingdom's economy directly determines their own economic situation, as more than 50% of their export goes to the British market.⁴⁰ In 2022, only 9% of the UK's trade was with the Commonwealth, and the bulk of it concerned only five member countries: Australia, Canada, India, Singapore, and South Africa. Combined, these countries were responsible for 74% of the UK's export to the Commonwealth and 68% of the UK's import from the Commonwealth.⁴¹

This confirms that, for the United Kingdom, it is in fact the larger players that count, and it was to them that the supporters of Brexit were addressing their campaign, speaking of the need to stimulate trade. The trade prospects of the other, smaller and developing countries of the Commonwealth are not as optimistic. Furthermore, following Brexit, the ties between the UK and the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP) were severed, resulting in the need to negotiate new trade agreements. In order to ensure continuity of the existing trade relations, the terms of the economic partnership agreements signed with these countries clearly refer to, and even remain partially coincident with, the previous agreements in this respect.⁴²

In the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh, it was emphasized that the United Kingdom would continue to strengthen the Commonwealth as an organization that brings

³⁸ HM Government, *Global Britain...*, pp. 61-62.

³⁹ Out of the 56 members of the Commonwealth, 33 are within the group of 42 countries classified as small; "Member Countries," *The Commonwealth*, at <https://thecommonwealth.org/our-member-countries>, 20 January 2024.

⁴⁰ Economic Policy Division, *Discussion Note: Brexit: Its Implications and Potential for the Commonwealth*, 2016, p. 4.

⁴¹ M. Ward, "Statistics on UK trade with the Commonwealth," *House of Commons Library*, 6 November 2023, at <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8282/>, 8 February 2024.

⁴² As a result, they inherited a number of the deficiencies of the trade system resulting from the EU's approach, at the same time inadequately reflecting the current strategic priorities and aspirations of the United Kingdom; for more, see L. Corula, "Trade with Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific: The UK's Economic Partnership Agreements," *King's Law Journal*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2023), pp. 66-67.

together a quarter of the UN members. At the same time, it was emphasized that it was necessary to take actions in order to intensify internal trade in the Commonwealth and support its member countries in attracting investments.⁴³

Considering the vision of the Indo-Pacific presented in the 2023 strategic document, the assumption is to ensure that it is a free and open region where a regional balance of power and a regional rules-based order are maintained. Moreover, according to international law, norms and rules regulate not only the actions taken on land, but also those taking place at sea, guaranteeing the safety of shipping lanes and the efficiency of the measures intended to prevent illegal fishing, as well as increasing the resilience of the region's countries against climate change and natural disasters.⁴⁴ This is especially important for the island countries of Oceania, which are currently the global leaders in combating multi-faceted challenges, such as limiting climate change and protecting the oceans of the world.

Assuming that in the context of the renewed geostrategic competition in the Pacific, the key issue from the perspective of global powers continues to be security, for the micro-countries of the South Pacific, it is always defined through climate change. This is why the enthusiastic reception of the global powers' interest in this region and the support for their vision of the future of the Indo-Pacific, including the island nations, which are a significant part of it, is conditioned by taking the security-related fears of those nations seriously. In this context, it seems necessary to provide the countries of Oceania with long-term support in terms of combating climate change and the catastrophic impact of this phenomenon on their existence.

The United Kingdom seemed to be aware of the pragmatic approach of these countries when it declared the will to further increase its engagement with the island countries of the Pacific and to build the resilience of the countries threatened by climate change and forced to tackle other environmental challenges for which they are, in fact, only marginally responsible. The current initiatives are focused on emphasizing the permanent presence of the UK in the Pacific, which is based on the belief that the original assumptions of the Indo-Pacific tilt have been achieved. The adopted approach assumes a continuation of this policy,⁴⁵ which involves making sure that British activities lead to the creation of long-term strategic foundations.

The United Kingdom's role in the region is to be stable and lasting, primarily thanks to respecting fundamental values, such as trust, understanding, and mutual respect,

⁴³ The UK is one of the few high-income countries that have been fulfilling, since 2015, the UN goal of assigning 0.7% of GDP to foreign development aid; M.L. Bishop, P. Clegg, "Brexit: Challenges and Opportunities for Small Countries and Territories," *The Round Table*, vol. 107, no. 3 (2018), pp. 329-339.

⁴⁴ HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023...*, pp. 23-24.

⁴⁵ This should be seen as a continuation of the Pacific Uplift policy announced by Boris Johnson in 2019, which is a clear reference to Australia's Pacific Step-Up and New Zealand's Pacific Reset; A. Rodd, "Britain and the Pacific Islands – A New Relationship?," *The Round Table*, vol. 109, no. 6 (2020), p. 758.

which are the core elements of the Pacific Way.⁴⁶ Building this trust is a process that was intensified as the diplomatic network of the UK was expanded in 2019 with nine new diplomatic posts in the countries of the Commonwealth, including three in the South Pacific.⁴⁷ The United Kingdom decided to go for efficient diplomacy, especially in the area of climate change, positioning itself as a global leader in this respect.

After Boris Johnson announced 2020 a 'Year of Climate Action', the UK adopted regulations on the basis of which it was to become a net zero emissions economy by 2050. Back then, it was emphasized that continuing global climate actions was the 'main pillar' of the renewed British engagement in the Pacific.⁴⁸ In the Integrated Review Refresh, support was declared for the highly important (due to it being based on regional oceanic identity understood as a basis for collective diplomacy) 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. The United Kingdom is also one of the founding members of the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative, the main purpose of which is to strengthen the actions of the region's countries under the aegis of a single 'Blue Continent'.⁴⁹ It was also pointed out that a green transformation leading to net zero was to be carried out through the Climate Action for a Resilient Asia program.

Acting together against climate change as the single biggest threat for the region is undoubtedly the key issue raised in different forums by the South Pacific island countries. However, it seems that they remain isolated in their actions. The potential of the Commonwealth has not been utilized at all—as a platform for cooperation chiefly between small countries joined by shared interests, such as security and the solving of key problems, including fighting the climate crisis, it could have been a form of expressing a collective voice. Yet, no initiatives in this respect were undertaken. This reflects the fact that the Commonwealth remains a weak and passive rather than active formula for multilateral cooperation, a peculiar relic of an imperial past that is no longer relevant to the contemporary state of affairs.⁵⁰

Contrary, therefore, to what Boris Johnson had declared within the framework of Global Britain, Rishi Sunak redefined the approach towards the Commonwealth as a forum that was to allow the United Kingdom to maintain a leading role after Brexit. The announced 'global perspective and global commitments' resulting from an increased presence in the Commonwealth have not materialized. Moreover, limitations

⁴⁶ HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023...*, pp 24-25.

⁴⁷ One of them was in Tonga, where China and its adversaries competed for influence. This resulted in a reserved response from Tonga, which is trying to protect its autonomy while at the same time enjoying the benefits provided by both parties to the conflict; for more, see C. Paskal, *Research Paper: Indo-Pacific Strategies, Perceptions and Partnerships: The View from Seven Countries*, London 2021, pp. 31-32.

⁴⁸ W. Morgan, "Oceans Apart? Considering the Indo-Pacific and the Blue Pacific," *Security Challenges*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2020), p. 62.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁵⁰ A. Hadfield, R.G. Whitman, "The Diplomacy..."

in terms of the ways in which the Commonwealth could contribute to the achievement of the ambitious post-Brexit goals of British policy have become apparent.⁵¹

Distancing himself from the Brexit and Global Britain promises focused around the Commonwealth, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak did not show any particular interest in the Commonwealth or belief that the organization could be a driving force. Similarly, he did not seem to care about the high sensitivity of the member countries that is related to the heritage and reputation of the former colonial empire.⁵² In addition to that, the revision of the assumptions in terms of zero net emissions by 2050, as signaled by Sunak's government, has weakened the existing ties to the member countries of the Commonwealth. The highly cautious approach to the achievement of the goals in terms of carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 has given rise to serious worries, especially among the island countries of the Pacific. In the opinion of a number of experts and climate activists, the United Kingdom's leadership in this respect has been undermined. The retreat from the key climate policies has harmed British ability to achieve the assumed climate goals, deepening the sense of the government not feeling responsible for the commitments it has made. This, in turn, has underscored the chasm between the rhetoric and the actual actions.⁵³

CONCLUSIONS

The post-global foreign policy of the United Kingdom, as presented in the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh, is a departure from the previous, ambitious rhetoric revolving around the concept of Global Britain. The publication of this strategic document allowed for a critical update of the interests and goals of British foreign and security policy in deepening the adopted vision of engagement and constructive international cooperation. It was also intended to evaluate the efficiency of performing international roles and the international status to which the UK aspires by specifying the priority areas of a globally-oriented foreign policy. The gradual abandonment of the term 'Global Britain' and the elimination of the narrative concerning the United Kingdom deserving

⁵¹ Meanwhile, the example of Barbados, which has been a republic since 2021, shows what results can be brought about by taking ties to the Commonwealth for granted and by ignoring the priorities of such countries; E. Dye, "Rishi Sunak Is Warned That Britain Risks 'Taking for Granted' Its Historic Ties with Commonwealth Countries as China Pushes to Replace Us," *Mail Online*, 3 September 2023, at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12474701/Rishi-Sunak-warned-Britain-risks-taking-granted-historic-ties-Commonwealth-countries-China-pushes-replace-us.html>, 14 February 2024.

⁵² This was illustrated by Rishi Sunak's speech during which he refused to apologize and undertake to pay compensation for the United Kingdom's participation in slavery; see K. Mohammed, "Sunak Was Brutally Honest, So Let Me Return the Favour: The Commonwealth Today Is Irrelevant," *The Guardian*, 2 May 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/may/02/the-commonwealth-with-all-its-pomp-and-ceremony-has-had-its-day-and-about-time>, 10 February 2024.

⁵³ F. Harvey, "Sunak's U-Turns Make Net Zero Harder and Keep Bills High, Watchdog Warns," *The Guardian*, 18 October 2021, at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/oct/12/sunak-u-turns-make-net-zero-harder-keep-bills-high-watchdog>, 10 February 2024.

to be an international leader were accompanied by more emphasis on greater efficiency in taking actions.

Rebuilding relations with European countries, especially the EU Member States, is an element that redefines British foreign and security policy. This is a realistic goal of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who presented a pragmatic approach. In view of the re-defined government priorities, the sense of stability in terms of the United Kingdom's identity has been replaced by a closeness to the European partners that is much greater than immediately after Brexit. The British contribution to strengthening the Euro-Atlantic security potential remains significant, in no small part due to the war in Ukraine. The ability to define cohesive goals and interests, covering close coordination of sanctions-related actions with the EU Member States and the USA can be interpreted as a signal of a clear change when it comes to the strategic position of the UK in Europe.

In this respect, the standpoint of successive governments, from Boris Johnson's to Rishi Sunak's, is clearly uniform. Maintaining the position of a European leader in terms of the assistance and aid provided to Ukraine is an element of continuing the direction of the United Kingdom's policy after Brexit.⁵⁴ In the Integrated Review Refresh, continued support for Ukraine's sovereignty in order to *deny Russia any strategic benefit from its invasion*, which *de facto* disrupts British, Euro-Atlantic, and international security, has been classified as one of the most urgent priorities of the UK in the Euro-Atlantic region.⁵⁵

'Returning' to this area as the greatest shift in the Global Britain narration after Brexit verifies the first of the three hypotheses adopted in this article. The 'new normal' expressed in the Integrated Review Refresh clearly revolves around the Euro-Atlantic region, which has been named an overriding priority of the United Kingdom. In spite of remaining outside of the EU, the UK has not ceased to be a major Euro-Atlantic power. This confirms the second hypothesis formulated in this paper. Moreover, the stability of the existing ties in the common attempt to build a secure, solidary, and affluent Europe is still determined by the closeness of relations with the countries of the Old Continent, and especially the EU Member States. Since political and security reasons affect the directions of trade policy to an increasing extent, it has been concluded that it is necessary to coordinate efforts with like-minded partners in a region that is a nexus for the key global security, trade, and economic growth networks.

What confirms the Sunak's government's pragmatic approach to the Indo-Pacific as the main arena of geopolitical rivalry is the fact that this region is perceived through the existing ties to the Euro-Atlantic region. It can be concluded that the development of a network of Atlantic-Pacific partnerships represents a process of ending the existing internal contradiction resulting from the dispersion of the priority areas within the Global Britain vision. In principle, it is based on two assumptions. The first one concerns the inseparability of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security. As a result, what happens

⁵⁴ J. Landale, "Sunak Vows that Ukraine Will Never Be Alone as He Pledges £2.5bn Package," *BBC*, 12 January 2024, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-67954152>, 13 February 2024.

⁵⁵ HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023...*, p. 41.

in one of these regions has an impact on the developments in the other. The other assumption is the emphasis on the reorientation from focusing on the Indo-Pacific as part of the Indo-Pacific tilt to a more extensive engagement in the areas in which the United Kingdom as a clearly defined Euro-Atlantic power is actually capable of having an impact. This consists mainly of strengthening the close ties to the other countries of the Anglosphere.

The partnerships with Australia and New Zealand remain important; they are based primarily on trade and security relations. Mutual trade relations are being deepened thanks to bilateral free trade agreements, but also within wider joint activities related to the UK being a part of the CPTPP, having the status of an ASEAN Dialogue Partner, and, in the near future, being a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum.⁵⁶ In terms of security, two formats of cooperation are of crucial importance: the Five Eyes Alliance and AUKUS, which is based on the many years of intelligence cooperation between the countries of the Anglosphere and, in accordance with the Integrated Review Refresh, is entering its implementation phase.

Even though the United Kingdom has a strong position and is perceived as an attractive and trusted partner in the Commonwealth, relations with members of this organization are not a priority for the UK when it comes to areas to exert influence. They are more of a nostalgic expression of revisiting former colonies. From the perspective of the island countries of Oceania, British presence was and remains important in view of the potential threats they are facing in connection with the continually rising sea levels and the climatic extremes. Consequently, they were anxious to hear Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's statement where he signaled that the United Kingdom would withdraw from its commitments related to the climate. For these countries, a slowdown in the implementation of changes means that this important issue will not be an object of much real action.

The diverging approaches to various issues, which became apparent in connection with the above, may complicate mutual relations in the future. The establishment of AUKUS was a harbinger of how the Pacific countries, although not involved directly, may perceive the overriding goals of the UK as irrelevant or even in conflict with their own security interests. The announcement of supporting Australia in the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines generated serious anxiety in the region's island countries in view of their attempts to keep the Pacific free from nuclear weapons. These countries claim that the potential deployment of British and American warships would be an open violation of the 1985 Treaty of Rarotonga, to which Australia, as a matter of fact, is a signatory.⁵⁷

This indicates that the third hypothesis posed in the article has only been half-confirmed. The post-global foreign policy in view of the 'new normal' so far consists

⁵⁶ Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, "UK-ASEAN Factsheet," *gov.uk*, 12 July 2023, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-asean-factsheet/uk-asean-factsheet--2>, 15 February 2024.

⁵⁷ J. Wallis et al., "Security Cooperation in the Pacific Islands: Architecture, Complex, Community, or Something Else?," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2023), p. 277.

of deepening relations with the leading Anglosphere states, i.e. Australia and New Zealand, but not necessarily with the Pacific Islands Countries that are members of the Commonwealth. Time will show how recognizing the high level of common interests in the Indo-Pacific—which is the other region of priority in terms of British international activity, with the South Pacific being an integral part of it—will translate to actual engagement of and assistance from the United Kingdom and whether those will be adapted, in the spirit of the Pacific Way, to the special relationships between these countries and the challenges they are facing.

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