As the United States and China have struggled over strategic control of the Pacific Ocean region in recent years, international media outlets have typically focused their attention on the situation in the South China Sea. However, a no less crucial “frontline” in the global confrontation between these world powers is yet another strategically important for the US part in the Pacific Ocean, Micronesia, has unjustifiably not garnered much attention from the media.

The South Pacific was viewed as “America’s own backyard” for a long time because of USA’s economic, political and military-strategic interests in the region despite the fact that, within its geostrategy, Washington gave preference to the northern part of the Pacific Ocean and Southeast Asia.

After the World War II, no one took issue with the United States’ presence in this region for an extended period of time, which allowed the USA and its allies (first of all France, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand) to establish control over most of Oceania. And the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS), signed in 1951, substantially increased their influence in the region (especially that of Washington). The United States put in a lot of effort to secure its position in this part of the world. The Compact of Free Association, an international
agreement with the United States, was thrust on the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau.

Military and political interests were a priority for the USA in this part of the world, which explains why Washington has been establishing a wide-reaching network of Air Force, Navy and ground-troop military bases in this region since World War II. The islands of Micronesia were of particular significance in this initiative. Military facilities in Oceania played and, at present, continue to play an important role within Pentagon’s nuclear doctrine. In the opinion of American military experts, the fact that the islands of Micronesia are situated a sizable distance apart from each other ensures the US military facilities are well-dispersed (a necessity in our Atomic Age). Therefore, it will be difficult to destroy USA’s line of defense by a single coordinated attack. Between American military bases in Hawaii and Guam lie the islands of Micronesia that nicely fit into the strategic “arc” created by the Pentagon, which extends from South Korea to Australia, and which the United States can, if necessary, use to reach Asia, the Pacific Ocean and even the Persian Gulf.

As a result, US policy in relation to the independent nations of Oceania was, first and foremost, aimed at ensuring that America’s enemies had no access to these territories. And the United States has, on more than one occasion, made it clear that it will do anything in its power to protect its interests there. According to American expert Dirk A. Ballendorf, as long as the United States continues to have strategic interests in Micronesia, it will continue to encourage the region’s dependent development and try to reduce its role to that of a useful “acolyte”. That is why Washington opposed United Nations’ decisions to decolonize these territories for a long time. And only in August 1991, it agreed that the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia should become UN Member States. In truth, when taking such a step, the United States must have been certain that these nations, restricted by agreements signed with Washington, would always continue to support the USA on all of its key issues during voting at the UN

Once the Cold War ended, US military and political interests in the South Pacific region decreased considerably. Overall, in the opinion of experts, USA’s policy in Asia Pacific essentially boiled down to maintaining the existing (at the time) status quo because it was truly agreeable for Washington, i.e. the United States did not have any military or political rivals in the region or any real threats.

The situation has completely changed in recent years on account of China’s growing ambitions to have its say in the South Pacific, and this has resulted in heightened tensions between the United States and the PRC in the military and political sphere. And if they had erupted, the conflict would have been comparable in terms of its consequences to the Battle of the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea.

Providing substantial financial assistance was always an important tool used by Washington to hold on to its position in Micronesia. Micronesia, with its de facto aid-dependent economy and a poorly developed natural resource sector that prevent the region from “standing on its own two feet”, is, at present, under the Free Association agreement with the United States. This means that foreign assistance provided by Washington pays for most of Micronesia’s government services and contributes significantly to its state budget. In exchange for all of this, Micronesia relies on the government of the United States to make its national security decisions for it, which essentially makes the nation one vast military base of the Pentagon (some analysts have even referred to it as the second “US 3rd Fleet” in the Pacific Ocean). In the meantime, the leadership of the country is only responsible for governance at the national level.

However, after the 2008 crisis, the United States cut the annual aid provided to Micronesia by almost one third and China began to fill the resulting “gap in the state budget”. At the same time, the push for sovereignty began to gain support in this region.

For instance, the referendum on independence of Micronesia’s Chuuk State is scheduled for March. The PRC supports the staging of this event, which could undermine the US relationship with Micronesia. If the outcome of the referendum is favorable for Beijing, China has already promised to increase the level of economic aid to the region. During President of the Federated States of Micronesia David W. Panuelo’s recent visit to Beijing, he enjoyed a grand welcome in China, where he was promised low interest loans and was asked not to interfere with the democratic will of the people during the upcoming referendum.

Washington staunchly opposes the possibility that the region will gain independence because its strategic deep water port is situated there. It is not only a commercial facility but also a convenient naval base for all types of military ships. Hence, one of Pentagon’s key tasks is to ensure that Chinese naval forces do not gain access to this port.
Still, admittedly, the United States does not have sufficient resources to take on Beijing in the South Pacific region. Washington cannot compete and quell China’s growing military, political and economic ambitions in Southeast Asia as well as in Oceania at the same time. That is why Washington will probably be unable to prevent the nations of the South Pacific from establishing closer ties with the PRC. Thus it is reasonable to predict that there will be a substantial rise in tensions between China and the United States in this region.

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