New Zealand is well-known for being a safe and quiet island nation that is stable and prosperous, and is rarely featured in news reports of global media outlets. Still, on account of the changes that are happening in the entire Asia Pacific area, such as the increasing role played by China and USA’s weakened influence in the region, even such a fairly small country felt the need to get involved in regional political processes to ensure it can continue its peaceful existence despite these changes.

In March 2018, Wellington launched the Pacific Reset policy aimed at strengthening and broadening New Zealand’s ties with other Pacific Ocean nations.

Considering its modest economic, political and military power potential in comparison to that of other influential players in the region, such as China, Australia and the United States, first and foremost, Wellington plans on consolidating its position within the South Pacific or Oceania, i.e. Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia (which encompasses New Zealand).

Despite its geographic location, New Zealand is part of the western political landscape and the Anglophone world, i.e. a group of nations united by a common language and culture that used to be included in the British Empire. Aside from New Zealand, Great Britain itself, the United States, Canada and Australia are all Anglophone countries.
Historically, all of these nations maintain friendly ties and actively cooperate with one another in all the spheres, including the security one. The fact that New Zealand and such a powerful country as Australia are situated in the South Pacific enabled the USA, which controls a substantial part of the North Pacific region and rules the Anglophone world, to view itself, for many years, as the most powerful nation in the Pacific Ocean. A substantial portion of the coastal areas on the Pacific Ocean belongs to Russia, however, until recently, Moscow had paid little attention to its Pacific affairs, focusing instead on its interests in Europe, Western and Central Asia, Africa, etc. Two other powerful nations of the Pacific region, i.e. Japan and South Korea, have been USA’s allies for a long time. Hence, not too long ago, the United States and other countries of the Anglophone world felt fairly comfortable in Asia Pacific and viewed small nations in the region, including Oceania, as a part of their sphere of influence. An area of Polynesia (New Caledonia, French Polynesia and the Territory of the Wallis and Futuna Islands) belongs to France, however, it is also a part of the western world that can easily find common ground with Anglophone nations.

Still, in the last decade, the situation has begun to change as China, which has gained enormous economic, political and military clout, challenged the West's dominance in the region. The PRC started to increase its military presence in the Pacific Ocean and its economic influence in relatively small nations of Asia Pacific, by gradually pushing Americans out. Oceania also became an area of interest for China, which began to lure the small island nations from the Western sphere of influence into its own with the help of generous loans and investments. The PRC even started negotiations with some of these countries (Fiji, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea), situated in the vicinity of Australia, on establishing its military bases in their territories. It is worth noting that these island nations are not very far from the headquarters of the United States Pacific Fleet (USPACFLT) in Hawaii.

Once Western countries learned about these plans, they sounded the alarm and began to re-establish their positions in Oceania. Due to Australia’s and New Zealand’s long-term ties with this region and their geographic proximity to it, the bulk of the work on keeping the island nations within the western sphere of influence fell on these two countries. The United States, in the meantime, undertook more global measures, such as engaging in a “trade war” with China and improving its relationship with PRC’s key rival in Asia – India. The USA, along with Australia and Japan, is planning on integrating its sphere of influence with that of India in order to ensure that a network of ties between India and the West in the so-called Indo-Pacific region leaves as little room for China as possible.

Therefore, New Zealand’s and Australia’s aim is to gain a foothold in the nations of Oceania, and if possible, reduce PRC’s influence there. This is no longer a simple task as, for instance, Fiji (an island nation situated between Polynesia and Melanesia) announced that closer ties with China had become one of its foreign policy priorities.

As part of the Pacific Reset policy (i.e. since March 2018), New Zealand began fostering economic cooperation with other nations of Oceania by, among other means, making substantial investments into their economies. An intensive program of high-level visits and meetings among these countries began, and New Zealand signed new Statements of Partnership with Niue, the Solomon Islands and Tuvalu. In June 2019, New Zealand’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Winston Peters visited Vanuatu (a nation in Melanesia), which became a prime suspect accused of having begun secret negotiations with the PRC on establishing a Chinese military base in its territory. Winston Peters and the leadership of Vanuatu discussed the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, which would allow New Zealand’s horticulture and viticulture industries to recruit workers from Vanuatu. He also promised to help citizens of Vanuatu who had suffered as a result of the Aoba (Ambae) Volcano eruption in 2018 and to provide financial aid amounting to $53.6 million in the next five years.

Aside from economic cooperation, New Zealand is trying to use the fact that it is, to a certain extent, a part of Polynesia to its advantage in its efforts to integrate with the nations of Oceania. According to the 2018 New Zealand census data, over 16% of the nation's population is of Māori descent, i.e. the Polynesian peoples who had inhabited the islands of New Zealand before the arrival of Europeans. In addition, there is a considerable number of members of Polynesia’s other ethnic groups, such as Samoans, Tongans, etc., living in the country.

Hence, New Zealand has been actively promoting the concept of Polynesian and Pacific Ocean identity, which unites all the peoples of Oceania. With this aim in mind, the nation has been staging various cultural events as, for example, an indigenous language week, which was celebrated not only in New Zealand in 2019, but also in Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Fiji and others. New Zealand’s Ministry for Pacific Peoples is in charge of such events.

Thus, by consolidating its influence in Oceania along with its key ally – Australia, New Zealand is trying to contribute towards the preservation of the order in Asia Pacific that it is accustomed to. However, the outcome of the battle between the United States and China for dominance in this region is far from certain, and New Zealand as well as Australia should be prepared to safeguard their own interests and ensure security without the help of the USA.
If the PRC does become a key player in Asia Pacific, New Zealand’s Pacific Reset policy along with similar Australian schemes may help both Wellington and Canberra gain a foothold in Oceania and transform this area into their own sphere of influence and one powerful South Pacific region, which can engage in dialogue with China with a lot more confidence than Australia and New Zealand could on their own without the support from Oceania.

Sofia Pale, Ph.D. of Historical Sciences, research associate with the Center for South-East Asia, Australia and Oceania at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.