Bougainville and its Independence in the Confrontation between the West and China

Oceania is a region with a relatively small land area, a small population and very few confirmed mineral resources. That is why Oceania rarely makes world news, which local populations accustomed to living a quiet life are probably fairly content with. And although there may not be many “hot” spots in Oceania, there are places where temperatures are far higher than the regional “average”. Bougainville Island is one of these places, located about 800 km east of the island of New Guinea.

The Autonomous Region of Bougainville is comprised of Bougainville Island and several other nearby islands in the Solomon Islands archipelago. They were part of the Australian-administered territories of Papua and New Guinea until 1975. On September 16, 1975, Papua New Guinea (PNG) gained independence from Australia and became an independent state. On September 1, 1975, however, just before PNG gained independence, Bougainville and the other islands which were to later form the Autonomous Region of Bougainville declared themselves the Republic of the North Solomons (RNS), independent of both Australia and PNG. RNS was not afraid to set sail on its own. The Panguna mine on Bougainville Island, one of the world’s largest copper deposits, began production in 1972, shortly
before the RNS declared independence, and the new state knew how to provide for itself. Apart from copper, there is also gold, other valuable metals, and a certain amount of oil to be found on Bougainville Island. However, the young state of Papua New Guinea also had plans for Bougainville’s resources, and has sent a group of police over to the island. Fortunately, no major clashes have broken out, and the decision taken following negotiations was that the North Solomon Islands were to remain part of PNG, although it gained greater self-governance rights and a province called the Northern Solomon Islands was created.

The copper mining on Bougainville Island was carried out by Bougainville Copper Limited of PNG, a subsidiary of the Australian-British Rio Tinto Group. Islanders were driven off the land to make room for mining operations. The extraction itself seriously damaged the island’s ecology, and the revenue generated by the mine went to Papua New Guinea, with the PNG national government receiving a 20% share of the profit from the mine. Apart from that, many labor migrants were brought to the island to work on the copper field, mostly Papua New Guineans who were not welcomed by the Bougainvilleans, as they perceived them as a threat.

In 1988, locals on Bougainville Island began killing the migrant copper workers. War broke out between Bougainville secessionist forces, primarily the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, and the PNG government. The separatist fighters once again declared the North Solomon Islands an independent state, and halted operations at the copper mine pending its nationalization.

The active fighting continued until the end of the 1990s. According to various sources, the war had a total death toll of between 15 to 25 thousand people. The Bougainville Civil War is considered the largest conflict to have occurred in Oceania since World War Two.

In 1997, negotiations mediated by New Zealand began between the PNG government and secessionist leaders. The Bougainville Peace Agreement was signed as a result in 2001, under which the North Solomon Islands became part of the Bougainville Autonomous Region, which gained its own autonomous government and received the right to hold an independence referendum.

In December 2019, a referendum was held as promised. More than 98% of voters cast their ballots in favor of independence from PNG. The Autonomous Region of Bougainville is now set to gain independence within the two years under the terms of agreements to which not only PNG and Bougainville are parties, but also Australia and New Zealand.

The decision on Bougainville’s independence would also need to be ratified by the PNG Parliament. It is unlikely that PNG will happily part with the mineral-rich island, but another war would probably break out on Bougainville Island if it were to refuse to do so, and various sanctions would also probably be imposed on PNG by Australia and New Zealand, which were involved in the many agreements signed which together formed the Bougainville Peace Agreement, and these countries are therefore also guarantors of compliance with the agreements.

Bougainville’s independence is a good opportunity for Australia and its joint mining corporation with the UK, Anglo-Australian multinational Rio Tinto, to regain access to the island’s resources and develop them again. The island’s residents have grown accustomed to blaming PNG and Bougainville Copper Limited acting on behalf of the PNG for all the troubles they have endured over recent decades (Bougainville Copper Limited is still suing the Autonomous Bougainville Government after the cancellation of its exploration license). Australia now has the opportunity to start developing relations with Bougainville “from scratch”, and negotiate mining on the island under more reasonable terms for Bougainville.

Australia will most likely have to make Bougainville a seriously attractive offer, given the current situation in the region. This is due to the fact that Australia, New Zealand and their ally, the United States, are now fighting to maintain their influence in the Asia-Pacific, as China has been gaining economic, political and military power for many decades, and is now keen to become the dominant force in the Pacific Ocean. As part of this strategy, China is doing everything it can to increase the influence it has in the region’s small and underdeveloped states, primarily through economic cooperation. The countries in Oceania are no exception, including Papua New Guinea, where Beijing has made its presence felt, and the number of Chinese citizens in PNG has increased significantly in recent years. The Celestial Empire has also set its sights on Bougainville, which China made clear by immediately recognizing the results of the December referendum. The United States was also quick to recognize the results. Vying for economic and political influence in the young state and for access to its resources may now become a new area of rivalry between China and the West, which has already colonized the entire region in the past.

As people now tend to say, Oceania is the “soft underbelly” of Australia and New Zealand. US strategic security also
depends on who controls this region. Given the current confrontation with China, these countries are therefore likely to do everything they can to ensure that Bougainville gains its independence following the referendum and prevent a hot spot from erupting within their buffer zone. The United States will also want to become Bougainville’s key partner before China gets there first.

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