Is the Chinese Threat along Australian Borders Real?

For more than one-and-a-half centuries, threats to Australia’s territorial integrity have remained relatively remote and very unlikely. The only time in history when Australian territory was subject to attack occurred during the years of WWII, when Japanese bombers carried out air raids, and the enemy fleet operated in its waters. Along with that, Japan chose the tactic of isolating Australia, and conducted its principal operations in strategic proximity to Australian shores, in Oceania. After invading New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, there were plans (not implemented) to capture New Caledonia, Samoa, and Fiji - the closest outposts avenues of approach to the Fifth Continent. This fact subsequently had a great influence on the defense strategy taken by Australia, since it demonstrated the pivotal role Oceania plays in Australian national security.

At this stage now, Australia is striving to bolster its defense potential. In 2020, Australia’s leaders announced that the country is going to spend over 400 billion dollars on defense over the next decade. On the one hand, this may indicate Australia's desire for greater self-reliance by virtue of the weakening role played by the United States in the Pacific Ocean. On the other hand, the Chinese factor is now coming out as one of the main topics on the agenda for Canberra not only in terms of foreign policy, but defense.

As its economic weight grows, China is beginning to express an active interest in the strategic significance held by Oceania. It has already become a major trading partner for island nations in the Oceanic region that, just like many
other countries in the world, are joining China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Vanuatu are
the Oceanic countries closest to Australian shores, and are of primary strategic importance for its defense policy.
Putting Chinese military bases in those nations would have spelled total disaster for Australia.

Considering the importance of Papua New Guinea, it should be noted that Australia’s strong ties with this island
state guarantee it a high level of security against invasion. For its part, China has been displaying an interest in PNG
for a long time now, including in the field of defense. In 2018, Papua New Guinea’s Prime Minister Peter O’Neill paid
a visit to the PRC, and expressed an interest in the Belt and Road Initiative, after which China began discussing a
joint plan with PNG for developing its local ports, including one on Manus Island. The island itself has a number
of advantages, including its strategic location, proximity to the South China Sea, and convenient natural harbor.
In response, in September 2018 Australia was able to “head off” China’s proposal and sign an agreement with PNG
worth 3.6 million USD on upgrading the wharf facility and other infrastructure at the Lombrum Naval Base on
Manus.

If the case involving Papua New Guinea’s cooperation with Australia bore virtually no marks of conflict, the situation
that occurred with Fiji was different. Fiji is the second-largest, and one of the most well-developed, out of all the
small island states in Oceania, and has a population of almost 1 million. After the military coup in 2006, Commodore
Frank Bainimarama, the commander-in-chief of the Fijian armed forces, who did not get along with Australian
leadership, came to power in the country. Until 2014, Fiji was temporarily barred from participating in the Pacific
Islands Forum, the main regional organization responsible for, among other things, distributing donor assistance
from foreign countries, without which the nations of Oceania would not be able to exist. Against the backdrop of
China’s growing influence in the Oceanic region, the change in Fiji’s internal political vector could not help but affect
the country’s foreign policy. By the 2010s, most of the goods in Fiji were coming in from China, and a number of
sectors of the Fijian economy had started to be financed by Chinese subsidies, loans, and investments. It is not
surprising that information about the possible deployment of a Chinese military base in Fiji was leaked to media
around the world, and China itself in 2017 submitted a bid to revamp the Black Rock Camp base in the Fijian city of
Nadi. In response, instead of the Chinese project Australia proposed that Fiji establish an Oceanic Regional Center
to Train Joint Police and Peacekeeping Forces, whose cost was estimated at 1.4 million USD. This proposal was
accepted by the Fijian side in exchange for a large scope of Australian investment.

Vanuatu has also been in Australia’s orbit for a long time, but in recent years the amount of aid that China has been
giving the Melanesian state has increased markedly, reaching almost 300 million dollars. In the spring of 2018, the
Australian press reported on negotiations between Vanuatu and the Chinese authorities on setting up a Chinese
military base on its land. The parties were quick to repudiate this information, but Australian and American
politicians have already expressed major concern over the reports that are being disseminated. This case involved a
Chinese infrastructure project on Vanuatu, Luganville Wharf on the island of Espiritu Santo, which is now the
longest wharf in Oceania. Since Luganville is an expensive project with a long payback period, Australia feared that
the PRC, with help from Vanuatu, would try to secure a permanent military presence in Oceania. In January 2019,
Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison made his first official visit to Vanuatu in over 20 years. Australia also
wanted to sign a regional security treaty with the Melanesian state, but the Vanuatu authorities made it clear that
the country is committed to the Non-Aligned Movement, and is not interested in signing that kind of treaty with any
country.

Since Prime Minister Scott Morrison came to power in 2018, Australia has reinforced its position in Oceania as much
as it has been able to. Nevertheless, China’s active penetration into the region could soon be fraught with a possible
military presence on Australian borders, and this is causing serious concern in Canberra. For its part, China, with its
characteristic pragmatism, will certainly not wage hostilities to exert its dominance in Oceania, but will try to
achieve its strategic goals peacefully, by cultivating trade, commercial, and social ties with Oceanic countries.

Dmitry Bokarev, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.