On France’s Feud with Australia

In recent years, the geopolitical situation in the Asia-Pacific region (APR) has been marked by extremely fast-moving development, not only in its contentious area – the South China Sea, — but also around the so-called Australian “line of defense” in the South Pacific region (SPR), where the interests of the global nuclear powers collide. Those powers are China, the US, the UK and India. Russia and North Korea, another two Pacific nuclear powers, should not be ignored either.

Tensions between Beijing and Washington were exacerbated when former US President Donald Trump took office and did not subside under Joe Biden’s administration. This rift forced the main SPR actor, Australia, that had been steering a course charted by its key strategic ally, the United States, to choose the path of ideological warfare with China while forging closer ties with Japan and India. In 2018 as Washington was ramping up its nuclear capability on Guam, the main American military base in the Pacific, to respond the Chinese efforts to establish military bases in some South Pacific states (Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea), a year later Australia signed a $66 billion contract with France to construct 12 attack-class submarines, which could have been later refitted to carry nuclear warheads.

At the same time, Canberra decided to enhance American military presence, as strong as it was at the moment, in the northern part of the country. The port of Darwin (the local capital, also dubbed “the Gateway to Asia”) is the hub of main Australian infrastructure networks with access to China which in 2015 took operational control of the port
under a 99-year lease. In other words, the strengthening of American influence in this area was designed to keep the Chinese in check. Thus, exploiting Washington’s strategic interests, China’s trade aspirations and friendly ties with France, Australia has been trying hard to maintain a balance in relations with its major nuclear partners in recent years.

It is worth mentioning another nuclear power which has been seeking to establish presence in APR — the UK. In 2021, the post-Brexit UK is again poised to portray itself as an independent player on the world stage and has already built up its nuclear capabilities by 40% to support this aspiration. Australia maintains extremely close relations with its former metropolis, considering that after the UK’s withdrawal from the Pacific, Canberra inherited all British South Pacific possessions. Technically Australia is ruled by the Britain’s Queen while this country is also a part of the British Commonwealth. The UK’s rising influence in the Asia-Pacific region is not resisted by Canberra which in June 2021 announced a free trade agreement with London.

Another influential state – Germany — also seeks to strengthen military ties with Australia, Japan and South Korea. That is why in the summer of 2021 it planned to send a warship to the Indian and Pacific Oceans with a long-term mission to demonstrate its presence in the SPR.

Russia also tried to project its power during military exercises in June 2021 as its warships sailed at a 23-34 miles distance past the Hawaiian Islands, home to US Pacific Fleet and American missile defenses. Since the Russian warships came so close to the Hawaiian Islands, this event sent some ripples across the US media.

Thus, nuclear tensions in the Pacific are becoming one the major issues on the current global agenda.

It is not surprising that the United States, which until the early 2000s was referred to as the “Pacific sheriff”, decided to take the leading role in creating a fundamentally new power landscape in the Asia-Pacific region. In the early 2000s, this role was bestowed upon Australia itself, but in the 2010s under Barack Obama’s administration the United States was poised to become a “Pacific power” once again, an aspiration seemingly fueled by the fact that then-US leader was born in Hawaii. This plan could materialize as early as this year, given that in September 2021 upon Washington’s initiative the UK, the US and Australia have entered a military alliance AUKUS, with the Pentagon announcing another buildup of the American military presence in Australia.

This decision met a stark rebuke from France and Germany, countries that were not invited to this cozy circle while Paris even recalled its ambassadors to the United States and Australia considering that Canberra had torn up the above-mentioned multibillion-dollar agreement with France on the supply of 12 submarines for the Australian Navy. The French called this decision “a stab in the back”. According to Paris, “you do not behave this way between allies”. This is the first time Paris has ever recalled its ambassadors to the US and Australia. The more reason this step looks serious and that is why global media pay so much attention to this topic. As for explanations coming from Australia, Canberra says that it does not need “conventional” submarines considering that regional tensions are on the rise. Australia apparently needs a more powerful arsenal, which it is planning to get from the alliance with the UK and the US.

However, keep in mind that the Australian “line of defense” which rests on the major Melanesian island states (the ones where, as already mentioned above, China wanted to deploy its military bases in 2018), also includes New Caledonia – the largest French possession in the SPR, which is just 1,500 km off the Australian coast. New Caledonia is the fourth largest nickel producer and a place where a French military base is stationed. France also controls Wallis and Futuna (strategically important islands) and French Polynesia (known as Tahiti), home to a French nuclear test site that has been inactive since 1996. Thus, from Australian perspective, France is endowed with the most important geostrategic position in the SPR, and previously Canberra has always been mindful of this fact when forging friendly ties with Paris.

Until recently, Australia acted as a mediator in the difficult and contentious relations between Washington, which represents Anglophone culture, and Paris, which represents Francophonie. Both have been at odds throughout history. And the fact that Canberra has finally straightened out its priorities and taken the side of its Anglophone partners despite long-time cozy relations with France, speaks volumes about how serious the current situation in the Pacific is.

It is possible that France’s exclusion from the AUKUS alliance would undermine political ties and stymie trade with Australia, which in this case will lose its 7th largest export, 4th import, and 9th foreign direct investments partner. Paris also could ramp up its military presence in New Caledonia, a move that would aggravate the delicate geopolitical situation in SPR which is tense as it is.
To sum up, it is worth noting that the actions of Washington, London and Canberra in the Pacific could heighten global tensions, since the new force balance derives from geopolitical games of not “conventional”, but nuclear powers. The rationale behind these actions (the need to deter China) may turn out to be nothing more than a smokescreen for more expansionist designs. Realizing that such outcome is, unfortunately, inevitable, Canberra had no choice but to side with the strongest, in its opinion, actors.

**Sofia Pale, PhD in History, Researcher at the Center for Southeast Asia, Australia and Oceania at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”**.