Australia and New Zealand Follow a Common Course

As might be expected, after the start of the Ukrainian special operation by Russian troops, Russia was hit by international sanctions, primarily from the West. Of course, permanent members of the “collective West” such as Australia and New Zealand have joined these sanctions. This is not surprising - as former British colonies, they are an indispensable part of the Anglosphere, a group of countries united by the English language, past membership of the British Empire, common culture and traditions. Australia and New Zealand have been important and consistent allies of the US and Great Britain, and could be said to be at the core of what we call “the West” in general. It is not surprising that they almost always join all major initiatives of Washington and London.

For example, in 2014 Canberra and Wellington immediately joined anti-Russian sanctions over Russia's reunification with Crimea.

Basically, Australia and New Zealand are rarely in the news when it comes to global political processes and events. Geographically, they are, one might say, “on the periphery” of the civilized world, in the South Pacific region, far from both Eurasia and America, and Australian-New Zealand geopolitical interests are mainly concentrated in this remote region. Nevertheless, Australia and New Zealand are highly developed economically, and their economic sanctions could seriously harm any country that engages intensively with them economically.
However, it is difficult to rank these countries among Russia’s most important economic partners.

For example, although Australia is a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum with Russia, their mutual trade turnover only slightly exceeded $849.5 million in the last “pre-COVID” year of 2019. Given the wealth of both countries, this small figure suggests that there is little mutual interest in economic cooperation between them. Of course, after the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world, even that modest figure began to dwindle, with trade between Australia and Russia reaching just over $787 million in 2020. The following year, however, Australia’s trade with the Russian Federation suddenly showed strong growth, resulting in an even higher figure than in 2019: in 2021, Russian-Australian trade exceeded $975 million. But still the figure is relatively small, and so it is difficult to see how Australia, at the cost of reduced economic cooperation, could deal a tangible blow to the Russian economy.

After the outbreak of hostilities, Canberra banned Australian financial and lending companies from working with certain Russian financial companies, state organizations and defense enterprises. However, as was to be expected, this had little effect.

The rest of Australia’s sanctions have been limited mainly to demonstrative action and lashing out at individuals.

Thus, on February 28, 2022, four days after the start of the Ukrainian special operation by the Russian armed forces, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced that his country had imposed personal sanctions against Russian President Vladimir Putin and other high-ranking Russian officials: Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev. A total of 350 high-ranking Russians, both politicians and military officers, were sanctioned. Also, the sanctions list includes Minister of Defense of Belarus, Russia’s ally, as well as 12 other Belarusian individuals and entities. All of these people and entities are banned from entering Australian territory. However, it is difficult to imagine why any of them would need to visit Australia at such a time.

It has also been reported that Australia has participated in disconnecting a number of Russian banks from the SWIFT payment system. However, it should be recalled that SWIFT is a community of banks around the world headquartered in Belgium, and the decision to disconnect a bank from SWIFT can only be made by the EU Parliament, and then this decision must be approved by the Belgian government. And so, although some Russian banks have been disconnected from SWIFT, Australia’s role in this is certainly minimal.

On March 3, the Australian government, represented by Minister for Communications Paul Fletcher, called on information giants such as Apple, Google, Microsoft, Meta, Reddit, TikTok and Twitter to fight the spread of messages from Russian state media. However, judging by their practices in recent years, these companies themselves know how to limit the dissemination of undesirable information, not only Russian information, and Australia’s calls seem redundant.

On March 8, 2022, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne announced new Canberra financial sanctions against the Russian Armed Forces, as well as a ban on a number of Russian military leaders from entering Australia. These sanctions do not appear to be painful for Russia either.

Three days later, Payne indicated that Canberra intended to ban imports of Russian hydrocarbon energy, and that the ban would take effect once the last of the paid shipments had arrived in Australia. However, as mentioned above, the volume of Russian-Australian trade is generally small and the cessation of hydrocarbon trade is unlikely to cause appreciable harm to either side.

However, it should be remembered that when announcing the February 28 sanctions, Prime Minister Morrison said, inter alia, that his state was working with its partners to start supplying weapons to Ukraine. It should be recalled that Australia has a well-developed arms production industry and is among the top 20 arms exporters.

For now the Australian sanctions have done Russia little harm and have not closed the way for the two countries to normalize relations in the future. However, if Australia puts its plan to supply arms to the Ukrainian Armed Forces and armed formations into practice, and if these supplies result in the deaths of Russian citizens, it will permanently tarnish Russian-Australian relations and affect their future development.

As for New Zealand, it did not even have specific legislation at the outbreak of hostilities that would allow the country to impose its own, individual sanctions on the Russian Federation. All New Zealand had to do was participate in the general international sanctions approved by the UN. Of course, it also banned V. Putin and the other individuals mentioned above from entering the country. However, Wellington appears to need to demonstrate its loyalty to Washington, especially after New Zealand has made some rather unexpected swings between
Washington and Beijing over the past few years, which have even led the media to talk about its breakaway from the core of the Western community. On March 7, 2022, the New Zealand leadership announced that it was introducing a sanctions bill against Russia in Parliament. If passed, Russian ships and aircraft would be banned from New Zealand waters and airspace, and Russian accounts in New Zealand would be frozen. It should be recalled that there have never been any direct flights between Russia and New Zealand, and the connecting flights between Moscow and Wellington were operated twice a week. When was the last time Russian ships made an official visit to New Zealand, the media do not report. Which New Zealand banks have Russian accounts is also unknown. However, it is unlikely to be large. The trade turnover between Russia and New Zealand in 2020 was just over $534.6 million.

It is to be hoped that by participating together with the US, Great Britain and Canada in the anti-Russian sanctions, Australia and New Zealand can strengthen their unity with the Western world and show their commitment to its values. Now, with the shadow of mighty China already looming over the South Pacific, they need this unity more than ever. In any event, Australia and New Zealand have so far failed to pose any significant challenge to Russia. However, it should be remembered that Russia is not the only country to be sanctioned by the West, and that mindlessly following Washington’s lead could put Australia and New Zealand in a very difficult position in their relations with Beijing. Unlike Russia, the PRC is not far off for Australia and New Zealand, and the anti-Chinese sanctions and the Chinese response to them could be a real problem for these countries.

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