At present the world is divided into two major camps on the principle of global redistribution of resources. One of these two groups consists of the BRICS group, with a population of 3.2 billion people, dominated by such giants as China, India and Russia, plus their allies around the world. The other group consists of the G7 nations, with a combined population of just 777 million, plus a number of other western and pro-Western nations. In terms of their share of the global economy, the two groups are evenly matched, and therefore in the current difficult global situation any new addition to either group is seen as an important development.

The twelve independent island nations of Oceania with a right to vote in the UN General Assembly have historically fallen within the USA’s sphere of influence (and thus that of its South Pacific allies Australia and New Zealand), but are now of increasing interest to China, which is making every influence to bring them into its fold.

It was back in 2003 that China first announced its intention to strengthen its relations with these Oceania island states and provide them with the financial support they so desperately need. Then, in 2006, Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier was the first Chinese leader to visit Fiji since diplomatic relations between China and Oceania began. While he was there he took part in a forum of economic development and cooperation between China and the South Pacific Island states. Since then the number of high-level official visits between China and Oceania has, for the first time, dramatically overtaken the number of visits between the Oceania countries and their traditional partners - Australia,
New Zealand, France, Japan and the US.

The progress made by China’s diplomats in establishing favorable relations with leaders in Oceania was already evident in the mid-2010s, when China managed to persuade some of the countries in the region that had established diplomatic relations with Taiwan to change their position and establish diplomatic relations with China instead. As a result, Taiwan, which previously had six allies in Oceania, now only has four: Palau, Tuvalu, Nauru and the Marshall Islands. And China now has eight: Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Kiribati, Vanuatu, Tonga, the Solomon Islands, Samoa and the Federated States of Micronesia. These states, plus New Zealand, have also joined China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which combines infrastructure, cultural and educational projects.

In 2014 Xi Jinping went on the first ever tour of Pacific states by a Chinese leader, and in 2018 this was followed by a second tour, after which, according to unconfirmed reports, China requested the leaders of the three largest island states in Oceania - Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu - to host Chinese military bases for the purpose of protecting trading infrastructure used in connection with its Belt and Road Initiative. In 2019 Australia’s diplomatic service managed to derail China’s attempts to extend its network of military bases in Oceania, by promoting the idea of a Pacific Family - a military grouping consisting of Australia, New Zealand and the island states in Oceania.

In a bid to resist the steady increase of China’s influence in the South Pacific, in September 2021 Australia, the US and Britain (the main former colonial power in the region, and the reason why the countries in the region are English speaking) established the AUKUS military alliance, which aims to extend the West’s nuclear capabilities in the Pacific region.

But in April this year representatives from Australia, the USA and Japan arrived in the Solomon Islands only to find that, despite their efforts, their host had, just days before, signed a framework agreement on security cooperation between Honiara and Beijing. Under the signed agreement China would be permitted to establish a military presence on the Solomon Islands. Since the Solomon Islands are located just 2,000 km from the Australian coast and form part of Australia’s “defense line”, the agreement was immediately described by experts as the “greatest diplomatic failure in Australia’s history”. With the agreement already signed, all Australia could do was to accept China’s reassurances that it would not set up any military bases on the Solomon Islands in the near future.

This development was a major disruption of the established relations between the Oceania countries and their Western partners, and Scott Morrison, the Australian Prime Minister, warned China against crossing a “red line”.

Scott Morrison understandably “missed” the signing of the framework agreement on security cooperation - as it coincided with the general elections held in Australia that same month, and the main focus was on domestic politics rather than foreign policy developments. Australia’s new Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, who took office on May 23, 2022, has insisted that Australia should send an appropriate answer to Beijing, as its security zone in the South Pacific has been contestcd by any country since the Second World War. Immediately following her appointment, Penny Wong, Australia’s new Foreign Minister, made a trip to Fiji. The trip took place on May 26, four days before Wang Yi, the Chinese Foreign Minister visited the country in order to sign a wide-ranging communique on trade and security issues with foreign ministers from 10 countries in Oceania. Wang Yi’s 10-day tour of 8 Oceania countries that are members of the Belt and Road Initiative, including Fiji and the Solomon Islands, took place in May-June 2022. However Penny Wong’s was able to offer the countries in the region additional support in the areas of defense, naval security, and the fight against climate change, and it appears that the countries in question found these proposals more attractive than what Wang Yi had to offer, and his planned communique remained unsigned. The simultaneous trips to Oceania by the Chinese and Australian Foreign Ministers were described by the press as a “diplomatic duel”, one which Australia is seen as having won, albeit by a narrow margin.

On June 24, 2022 the region’s traditional supporters - the USA, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and the UK established Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP), an informal partnership seen as an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative. The PBP is intended to strengthen the financial and diplomatic relations between the countries in Oceania and address issues such as climate change, the consequent rise in sea levels which threatens to submerge a number island states, including Kiribati, and illegal fishing within the countries’ exclusive economic zones - which is a significant issue for countries whose economies are heavily on this sector.

The geopolitical rivals’ vying for control over Oceania, which increases in intensity with every visit by high-ranking Chinese or Western officials to the South Pacific nations is in reality a trying experience for these fragile island states, which need care and attention, and not ultimata and demands that they take sides in a standoff between global nuclear superpowers. In mid-July Fiji will host the Pacific Islands Forum 2022, a major annual regional event to be attended by leaders from the Oceania island states, Australia and New Zealand, and their dialogue partners -
the USA, China, India, the EU, Japan, the UK, Canada, South Korea and Singapore. But less than a month before this event, it began to be rumored that the US and China, if not the other dialog partners, may be excluded from this event, in order to allow the regional nations to peacefully resolve the issues that affect them. That would at least save them from wasting valuable time listening to ideological speeches or, which would be worse, from being involved as proxies in a confrontation between the US and China.

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