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PROSPECTIVE CHANGES IN AUSTRALIA'S SECURITY STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

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This study, which focuses on regional political relations and security, presents possible future changes in Australia's security strategy in the South Pacific region. The goal is to develop a short-term forecast for Australia's security policy in the South Pacific. Eight predictive assumptions are proposed, with a causal explanation for each. The study contributes to research by describing the presumptions driving Australia's strategic security measures in the South Pacific in the decade beginning from 2022, as obtained from an examination of Russian and English language materials and historiography. The findings can help shape future research on the South Pacific and, more broadly, on regional security.

Keywords: South Pacific region; military-political cooperation; infrastructure projects; Belt and Road initiative; Blue dots network; regional leadership.

ПРОГНОЗ ИЗМЕНЕНИЯ СТРАТЕГИИ БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ АВСТРАЛИИ В ЮЖНО-ТИХООКЕАНСКОМ РЕГИОНЕ

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Представлен авторский прогноз изменения стратегии безопасности Австралии в Южно-Тихоокеанском регионе (ЮТР). Объект исследования – региональные политические отношения в сфере безопасности. Предмет исследования – стратегия безопасности Австралии в ЮТР. Целью работы является подготовка прогностического сценария развития стратегии безопасности Австралии в ЮТР на краткосрочную перспективу. Автор выделяет восемь прогностических положений в стратегии безопасности Австралии, подробно раскрывает их и освещает причинно-следственные связи для каждого такого положения. Новизна данного исследования заключается в том, что оно содержит основанные на анализе как русскоязычных, так и англоязычных источников и историографии предположения о стратегических шагах, которые будет предпринимать Австралия в ближайшие (с 2022 г.) десять лет для обеспечения безопасности в ЮТР. Результаты работы могут быть использованы для дальнейшего развития данной темы и в более комплексных исследованиях в сфере региональной безопасности.

Ключевые слова: Южно-Тихоокеанский регион; военно-политическое сотрудничество; инфраструктурные проекты; инициатива “Один пояс, один путь”; сеть голубых точек; региональное лидерство.

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Introduction

Many academics have dubbed the 21st century the Pacific era, referring to the Asia – Pacific region’s pivotal geopolitical position and possibly crucial role in world politics and international affairs.

Divergent national interests, which have resulted in political disputes, have recently put regional security in the Asia – Pacific region on the centre stage.

Throughout the 20th century, Australia’s involvement in the area was minimal, but its recent growth to a middle-sized power in the Asia – Pacific region resulted in its “turn towards Asia” in 2007, transforming it into a sub-regional leader in the South Pacific. China has been competing with Australia for leadership in the South Pacific since 2008. China’s military growth, expanded military presence, and treaty with the Solomon Islands have all had implications for Australia’s security and sub-regional leadership. Predicting changes in Australia’s security policy in the South Pacific is thus a relevant topic for research. Broad philosophical principles of comprehensiveness and determinism were applied in this work. It uses analysis, synthesis, abstraction, comparison, and analogy as its cognitive methodologies. Political science procedural methods were applied, including institutional analysis, content analysis, sociological, normative-value and systemic analysis, and the historical retrospective approach.

The studies of R. Glasser [1; 2], P. Jennings [3], A. Garin [4; 5], A. Tolstosukhina [6], V. Gulevich [7], and E. Pozdnyakov [8], among others, served as the foundation for the predictive hypotheses. Document

analysis included official sources, such as Australia’s defence white papers of 2009, 2013, 2016 (including the 2020 Defence strategic update), 2020 Force structure plan and 2017 Foreign policy white paper¹.

According to R. Glasser from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, the Australian Government has to pay attention to climate and environmental change – now that they have been ignored for so long – since both have an impact on the country’s security [1; 2].

P. Jennings, a former deputy secretary for strategy at the Australian department of defence (2009–2012) who is currently the executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, cautions that unless Australia engages with the Solomon Islands, a Chinese military base there may be established, which will affect Australia’s regional strategic and security interests.

A. Tolstosukhina from the Russian International Affairs Council examines developments in the South Pacific area, predicts their future ramifications, and outlines Australia’s choices for enhancing its competitive position against China [6]. In light of China’s growing regional influence, V. Gulevich reviews developments in Australia’s ties with Indonesia and the Solomon Islands [7].

The US-Australian and US-Chinese relations are examined by E. Pozdnyakov from the Pacific Research University in the context of the Biden administration’s new foreign policy strategy in the Asia – Pacific region, which emphasises China’s containment by fostering old and new partnerships [8].

The main part

Firstly, we predict that Australia will continue its island chain strategy and the pursuit of the military and economic containment of China in its future security strategy for the South Pacific. To this end, Australia will continue to raise its defence spending to offset China’s growing military presence in Oceania and its suspected intention to establish military bases there and to become more self-sufficient militarily, given the US limited activity in Oceania. In light of China’s expanding military, a perceived rise in naval presence, and rising aspirations in Oceania (as evidenced by the China – Solomon Islands pact), Australia’s military presence in the South Pacific region will continue to build up.

The discourse of the 2020 Defence strategic update and Australia’s defence white papers of 2009, 2013, 2016 may indicate Australia’s increasing emphasis on chal-

lenges to its security and the region’s rule-based order. The word “security” was used 267 times in the Defence white paper in 2009, 322 times in 2016, and more than 390 times in the 2020 update. The term “rules-based” (rules-based order) appeared 59 times in 2016 and 2020, up from 11 in 2009 and 2013. In the upcoming years, the emphasis on security is likely to increase even more.

Australia plans to procure and upgrade up to 23 military ships at the cost of 127 bln US dollars. Australia now produces offshore patrol ships of the “Arafura” and “Guardian” classes, which are supplied to Oceania. It will begin to build “Hunter” class frigates and “Attack” class submarines in the following two to three years. The submarine fleet is receiving more focus. A strike-class submarine would now cost Australia around 35 bln US dollars. Submarines can be a particularly efficient means

¹Defence white paper 2009 [Electronic resource]. URL: http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/2009/docs/defence_white_paper_2009.pdf (date of access: 05.10.2022); Defence white paper 2013 [Electronic resource]. URL: http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/2013/docs/WP_2013_web.pdf (date of access: 05.10.2022); Defence white paper 2016 [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://www.defence.gov.au/WhitePaper/Docs/2016-Defence-White-Paper.pdf> (date of access: 07.10.2022); 2020 Defence strategic update [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2020-defence-strategic-update> (date of access: 10.10.2022); 2020 Force structure plan [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/publications/2020-force-structure-plan> (date of access: 10.10.2022); 2017 Foreign policy white paper [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.fpwhitepaper.gov.au/foreign-policy-white-paper> (date of access: 07.10.2022).

of defence given Australia's geographical position and the size of the island territories inside its sphere of influence [4].

Australia's drive to improve its defence capability is motivated by a desire for more independence in preserving security within the South Pacific, in addition to offsetting China's expanding military strength [4].

According to Australia's 2020 Defence strategic update, only American nuclear and conventional weapons can effectively deter possible nuclear threats to Australia. The government does, however, aim to take greater responsibility for Australia's security, and considers it essential to build its military power. Additionally, given its limited resource base, Australia must develop its military capabilities at its own pace, without attempting to keep up with the other major powers, according to the 2020 Defence strategic update. This involves, for instance, developing long-range attack weapons and cyber-warfare capabilities to keep enemy forces and infrastructure away from Australia. In defence planning, the government will concentrate on the immediate region of key strategic importance to Australia, extending from the northeast Indian Ocean, mainland Southeast Asia, to Papua New Guinea and the Southwest Pacific, where it will project its power and influence to protect shared regional security and trade interests. Under the 2020 Force structure plan, the government will allocate 270 bln US dollars over the decade 2029–2030 towards meeting its defence needs².

Secondly, as the nations closest to Australia, the Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea will receive priority in Australia's defence cooperation. These nations are also pursuing a multi-directional foreign policy strategy, which includes strengthening connections with China.

During World War II, when Australia anticipated being invaded by Japan, it fought elsewhere – in modern-day Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, or the Coral Reefs – rather than in its territory. This event highlights Oceania's strategic importance for Australia's security. The militarisation of the South Pacific, predictions of "a poorer, more dangerous, and more disorderly world after the pandemic"³, and calls for Australia to be better prepared for high-intensity conflicts (which the Prime Minister mentioned in his statement) are all driving Australia to invest in its defence cooperation and security.

Additionally, the US, Australia, and New Zealand were disturbed by China's agreement with the Solomon Islands, which prompted Australia to strengthen its ties to these nations. According to the terms of its agreement with the Solomon Islands, which it sees as

a diplomatic success, China will help the country keep the peace, safeguard the lives and property of its residents, and deal with natural catastrophes, including by sending its army and police forces. On invitation from the government, Chinese ships will also have the right to enter its ports [7].

The Solomon Islands have revoked their recognition of Taiwan's sovereignty in exchange for Beijing's commitment to invest in building roads and bridges. China is concurrently expanding the staff of its embassies across the region, particularly in Vanuatu, Fiji, and Kiribati, which has Australia worried that it may eventually set up a military base there, as well as in Fiji and Papua New Guinea [7].

Papua New Guinea has been deepening its ties with China, but Australia is still its main security partner. It provides key support to the 2001 Peace agreement between Papua New Guinea and the autonomous government of Bougainville⁴.

Papua New Guinea's population is 8 mln people, where 40 % aged below 15. It is expected to reach 18 mln people by 2050, even as the country is already facing serious development challenges. Papua New Guinea is not on track to achieving many key development targets, including maternal and child mortality, infectious disease, access to clean water and sanitation. Australia has been spending about 550 mln US dollars annually on health, education and economic growth in Papua New Guinea. Some 4,600 Australian firms have invested 18 bln US dollars in the country. Australia's aid to Papua New Guinea will continue in the expectation that it would make its security choices in Australia's favour. Despite its strong and long partnership with Papua New Guinea, Australia has a more adversarial relationship with Fiji. In 2009, Fiji was expelled from the Pacific Islands forum at Australia's initiative and then refused to return when it was invited back. In these circumstances, Fiji has been deepening its relationship with China.

Thirdly, Australia will restore its relationship with Fiji to a high-level partnership and has already begun to do so.

In 2017, China offered to rebuild part of the Black Rock camp base in Nadi, Fiji, and construct an airport there. In turn, Australia offered to establish on Fiji a regional centre for the training of joint police and peacekeeping forces of Oceania if it rejected the Chinese military base project. Fiji accepted the Australian offer in exchange for large Australian investments [4].

In response to the probability of a pact between Beijing and Honiara, Australia renewed its pre-existing agreement with Fiji. Similar to New Zealand, Australia's strategy to contain China involves maintaining control over the Pacific island chain extending from

²2020 Defence strategic update [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2020-defence-strategic-update> (date of access: 10.10.2022).

³Ibid.

⁴2017 Foreign policy white paper [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.fpwhitepaper.gov.au/foreign-policy-white-paper> (date of access: 07.10.2022).

Tuvalu and Fiji through Kiribati and Palau to the Philippines and Japan [7].

As far as the Solomon Islands are concerned, Australia will likely seek to convince them that it will be their best security partner. In all probability, Australia may offer to build its naval base in the Solomon Islands. This will include a range of military construction and engineering projects that Australia might propose with the United States that will improve the Solomon Islands' outdated infrastructure [3]. In the assessment of P. Jennings – which appears credible – China's growing presence in the Solomon Islands if left unchecked, will ultimately lead it to establish a military base there. Therefore, Australia will likely seek to open its naval base in the Solomon Islands ahead of China.

Fourthly, although both Australia and China will continue to build up their military power, neither will be likely to engage in an armed conflict for their exclusive leadership in the region in the short or long-term perspective.

In the assessment of A. A. Garin of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, with which we concur, Australia is universally recognised as a guarantor of security in the South Pacific region. Nor will China be willing to appear as an aggressor, because it has been advocating for a community of common destiny. Moreover, the USA and France have territorial possessions in the South Pacific. Any attack in Oceania will entail the involvement of ANZUS and NATO, and military action is unlikely to benefit any party.

Fifthly, China will continue to invest in infrastructure and lend to the South Pacific to engage its states in its Belt and Road initiative. Australia will react by accelerating its infrastructure projects and strengthening its humanitarian activity with its partners.

Beijing will continue to strengthen its position in the South Pacific region by offering help to vulnerable countries in the form of grants, and concessionary loans to bring on board as many partners in the Belt and Road initiative as possible. Infrastructure initiatives will be the primary focus. Australia will keep working to address regional issues through the Pacific assistance programme, which includes attracting labour migrants, promoting tourism, and offering financial and technical assistance to address issues related to climate change and natural disasters [6]. Australia will collaborate within the Blue dot network and contribute to the Australian infrastructure financing facility.

Australia will push for India's participation in the Blue dot network with cooperation from the US, enhancing the credibility of the project.

J. Biden, who has been critical of several of D. Trump's initiatives, carried on with the Blue dot network project in its original form. Many analysts anticipate its expansion outside the Asia – Pacific region and think it has promise.

Remarkably, the Blue dot network is potentially accessible to any regional player and is not restricted to a small group of participants. Collaboration with India is especially appealing since it will significantly improve

its status. On 27 February 2020, D. Trump met with Indian Prime Minister N. Modi to entice India to join. The Prime Minister showed interest, noting the project's strong potential for the region. India typically takes time to consider any membership proposal. For example, India's Foreign Minister Harsh Vardhan Shringla stated that although membership in the Blue dot network was being considered, a careful legal review was required. Undoubtedly, the increasing hostility between Beijing and Washington is upping the pressure on India to choose a side. New Delhi may ultimately be inclined to join the Network due to its interest in dialogue within quadrilateral security dialogue [8].

Sixthly, climate change will play a significant role in China and Australia's leadership struggle, forcing Australia to step up its climate efforts in the region.

Small island nations in the South Pacific are particularly at risk from cyclones, floods, and tsunamis. From the 1950s through 2010, there were more than 200 catastrophes that affected over 3.5 mln people [1].

China and Australia have seen the devastating effects of climate change firsthand. Two-thirds of China's land area is susceptible to floods. Even though it is home to 20 % of the world's population, it only has 12 % of the world's arable land, much of which is drought-prone, and many of its northern aquifers are already overused. Bushfires during Australia's most recent "black summer" devastated 24 mln hectares and took the lives of 480 Australians directly and indirectly [2]. As a result, both nations are sympathetic to the worries of the small island states and will take proactive measures on climate.

A. Albanese, the leader of the Labour party in Australia, compared climate change to nuclear annihilation and called it a serious national security issue on the eve of the election. Opposition spokesman B. O'Connor claimed that lasting national security was impossible to achieve in the absence of an effective response to climate change [2].

The Solomon Islands and Kiribati announced a scaling down of ties with Taiwan in 2019, citing China's climate assistance as the cause. China, a major provider of renewable energy technologies, has pledged to stop supporting Oceania's coal-fired power stations and encourage renewable energy projects instead. This move might improve its reputation in the South Pacific.

The Solomon Islands and Kiribati may have been influenced to strengthen ties with China in 2019 by US's ambivalent attitude on climate change in its foreign policy. Both cited the US decision to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement and Australia and New Zealand's inaction as contributing factors. China may benefit from J. Biden's opposition to international agreements to reduce emissions [1].

To stay competitive in the regional leadership struggle, Australia will aim to equal China's gains in the climate area through the Pacific Islands forum, where it is the leader and where it could preside over climate change policy, contribute its resources, and engage in international diplomacy [1].

Partners in the Blue Pacific, a new regional alliance to foster collaboration on the region's objectives and assist the island states, was announced on 24 June 2022, by Australia, the UK, New Zealand, the US, and Japan. According to the founding declaration, its member nations will adhere to the Pacific Islands forum's strategy through the year 2050⁵.

Australia's elections in March 2022 resulted in the election of a new labour government. The new foreign secretary, P. Wong, reaffirmed her government's commitment to combating climate change in remarks made during a trip to Fiji: "I understand that Australia has neglected its responsibility to act on climate change, ignoring our Pacific family's calls to action under previous governments". She also said that Australia has formed the "Australia – Pacific climate infrastructure partnership" to aid energy and infrastructure initiatives connected to climate change in the South Pacific and Timor-Leste⁶.

Seventhly, the South Pacific won't be divided into military-political blocs.

A northern and southern block made up of allies of China and the United States, according to A. V. Dyshin and D.U. Demina of the Far Eastern Federal University, is a realistic scenario [9].

However, this divide is improbable in our opinion. Only two of the states in the area, Papua New Guinea and Fiji, have armies, and all of them rely on Australia and other Western countries for their protection. It appears unlikely for any of these nations to challenge Australia by joining a rival alliance. Small island states also have cultural ties to Australia, the United States, and France. The latter two have several islands as their foreign territories. As a strategic "backyard" bequeathed to it by Great Britain, the region has historically been Australia's sphere of influence. Furthermore, Oceania's nations are closer to Australia than to China in terms of their liberal ideologies and ideals.

Hedging looks like a more likely course of action for these states.

As a result of China's economic rise and its expanding influence, particularly in areas like infrastructure, health, and climate, as well as the impending expansion of the Belt and Road initiative, the majority of island nations will adopt a hedging strategy in their relations with China and Australia to benefit from cooperation with both. By weighing the economic benefits from China and the security benefits from Australia, they will come to emulate Australia which had been hedging for years in its relations with the US and China.

Finally, Australia will continue to be a regional leader despite China's recent growth, which is expected to continue in the coming years.

A. A. Garin highlights the value of the 2020 survey titled "Powers, norms, and institutions: the future of the Indo-Pacific from a Southeast Asia perspective"⁷ for the analysis of Australia and China's interactions in Oceania in his article "Australian foreign policy 2020: development aid, defence, and trade war with China" [5]. A. A. Garin contends that certain generalisations about the South Pacific may be made from the survey responses provided by the Fijian policymakers who took part.

Fijian respondents identified Australia as the region's most influential actor and named China, New Zealand, the European Union, and the United States among its other major players. In ten years, they anticipated China to reach the same level of influence as Australia [5].

The opinions of the responders from Fiji should not be taken as indicative of the South Pacific, in our opinion. Fiji competes with Papua New Guinea for influence as a developing mid-sized regional power, aspires to greater independence from Australia, and has long pushed for lessening the influence of Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific Islands forum and the region.

We reject the notion that China will rival Australia in terms of regional impact for the following reasons.

Although China outperforms Australia in credit and infrastructure, Australia is now catching up, both individually and in collaboration with other countries (for example, through the Blue dot network initiative and the Australian-Pacific infrastructure financing facility). Australia is unquestionably a global leader in humanitarian action, and vaccine diplomacy, and has been strengthening its leadership on climate change.

Australia has been and will continue to be the South Pacific's main security pillar. By joining AUKUS and boosting spending to maintain a larger military presence in the Asia – Pacific and South Pacific, it has already reinforced its defence posture.

The Pacific Islands forum will continue to be the most important and influential regional international institution with Australia at its helm. Alternative organisations (such as the Fiji-sponsored Melanesian initiative group and the Pacific Islands development forum) lack the ability and resources of the Pacific Islands forum.

Australia retains a wide array of partnerships, including those with Japan (which has increased its regional presence by taking part in infrastructure projects) and the United States (which has once more focused its attention on the region under J. Biden).

⁵Statement by Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States on the establishment of the partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/24/statement-by-australia-japan-> (date of access: 12.10.2022).

⁶Why Australia is declaring a "new era" in the Pacific [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-61669954> (date of access: 24.09.2022).

⁷Powers, norms, and institutions: the future of the Indo-Pacific from Southeast Asia perspective [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/powers-norms-and-institutions-future-indo-pacific-southeast-asia-perspective> (date of access: 11.10.2022).

Small island nations have a shared history with Australia, the United States, and France. Some islands in the area are French and American foreign territories. As Great Britain's strategic "backyard" left to Australia, the South Pacific and Oceania have historically been under its sphere of influence. Furthermore, in terms of their

liberal ideas and values, the nations of Oceania are nearer to Australia than China. The interests of national security are major influences on how nations act, according to the realist theory. Australia will defend its leadership in that area because it is so crucial to its national security. The area is less significant for China's security, though.

Conclusions

The following assumptions regarding Australia's future security plan are suggested.

1. Australia will continue to invest in its defence and expand its military presence in the region as it pursues military and defence cooperation with its sub-regional partners and the island states, most notably the Solomon Islands, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu. Australia can propose setting up a naval base in the Solomon Islands and promoting several military and engineering initiatives with the United States to update the country's ageing infrastructure.

2. A military confrontation over regional leadership will not be started by either China or Australia. Instead, both will refine their current and new tools for regional

competition. Australia could collaborate with the US to include India in the Blue dot network initiative.

3. Australia will concentrate on solidifying its stance on climate change, particularly within the framework of the Pacific Islands forum.

4. It is doubtful that the South Pacific will be divided into military-political blocs. Small island states are more inclined to use hedging strategies.

5. In the short- and medium-term, Australia will continue to lead in the South Pacific. Although China outperforms Australia in economy, credit and infrastructure, Australia is the South Pacific's main security pillar, the leader of the Pacific Islands forum and it has more influential power.

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