

ASIA PROGRAM

CHINA'S AMBITION IN THE PACIFIC: WORLDWIDE GEOPOLITICAL ISSUES

BY

PACO MILHIET

PHD STUDENT, INSTITUT CATHOLIQUE DE PARIS

NOVEMBER 2017

ASIA FOCUS #49



The phenomenal economic ascent of China since the early 1980's fully modified the international geopolitical relations in the era of globalization. Chinese capitals and workers are omnipresent in Africa, Eurasia symbolizes the Chinese government's willingness to establish a new Silk Road and the regionalization of Chinese interests in Asia replaces the Middle Kingdom at the spotlight of the international community's attention. The Pacific does not escape to the phenomenon and the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) meticulously pilots its relation in this region, according to its present and future interests.

The Pacific, immense maritime territory, often incorrectly represented in European maps, is a region characterized by its insularity and its remoteness from the major commercial roads. It is difficult to define geographically such a vast area, but it is generally acknowledged that Australia and the emerged lands of the South Pacific form the 5th continent of Oceania. In the present report, "the Pacific" will be defined as a global region, gathering the vast ocean and the neighboring countries. The coherence of this choice is illustrated by the progressive incorporation of these countries in the Asia-Pacific Region.

In this context, we will try to describe how China, as a new major economic power, exercises a fundamental influence in the Pacific, a region that returns to the center of the major international problems at the beginning of the 21th century.

The Pacific: International Center of the Political issues in the 21th century

Since the year 2000's, the strategic interest of China has extended beyond the China Sea, the southern islands, the Taiwanese strain and the peninsula of Korea. Historically, Chinese geopolitics mainly focused on land territories. Most of their territorial disputes were solved in the 1960's and 1990's and China now focuses on its maritime influence.

The new strategic doctrine of the Chinese People's Liberation Army is organized around the will to make the South China Sea a Chinese sea and to expand its immediate maritime interests. The Chinese navy justifies itself to its neighbors, necessarily worried, by the necessity of escorting the commercial vessels essential to the economy of the country; but it is known that the priority of the new Chinese strategy is to become operational beyond the China Sea and the Philippines.

Are we witnessing a new economical war in the Pacific between the United States, first economic and military power in the world, and the People's Republic of China, its outsider, which might take the lead in a few years?

The United States, considered in relative decline, intend to retain their pre-eminence and want at all costs to limit the geopolitical and economic ambitions of China.

Despite the isolationist promises during the electoral campaign, the new president Donald Trump does not intend to lose its place in the Pacific, a region that symbolized America's hegemony during the 20th century. China wants to regain the influence it had in the region in its imperial past.

It is therefore feared that the aggravation of the Korean crisis will be merely the prelude to a new conflict period in the Pacific.

CHINA: A MAJOR POWER IN THE PACIFIC REGION

In 2003, while giving a speech to the Australian Parliament, the first secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Hu Jintao, insisted on the historical links that existed between the two countries and mentioned the example of Zheng He, a court eunuch, fleet admiral who commanded expeditionary trips all around the world including some in the South Pacific Islands. By referring to this controversial historical source, inspired by Gavin Menzies in 2002¹, Hu Jintao voluntarily modified the Chinese National Novel and tried to create a historical and cultural connection between China and the South Pacific Islands. He therefore affirmed the precedence of the Chinese on Europeans in this region and their supremacy. This historical activism foreshadows the Chinese cultural influence in this vast region of the world.

China's growing influence in the Pacific Islands

Overseas Chinese: a vector of integration between China and its neighboring countries

The Chinese emigration started in the 12th century and has accelerated throughout the 19th century, stimulated by the decadence of the imperial regime, but also by the colonial ambitions of the western countries. Today, those communities of "overseas Chinese" represent a considerable economic force.

With an economic growth of about 7% each year, China is becoming one of the most attractive markets in the world. It offers to its emigrants the same benefits today as the countries where they immigrated during the waves of migration, which are political stability and a potentially huge internal market

The investment of the Chinese diaspora is a two-way process. It is a vital bridge on the development of financial flows between North and South Asia, but also between China and the rest of the world. These communities have an insatiable appetite for business;

¹ Gavin Menzies, 1421, l'année où la Chine a découvert l'Amérique, Intervalles, 2007

those investments will in the near future extend to all regions of the world. The realities of immigration have further exacerbated the tradition of maintaining the indispensable network of relationship, organized in concentric circles; first the family, then the friends, next the natives of the same regions and finally all the Chinese. Overall, this power forges close economic ties.

The Chinese diaspora in the Pacific

In the Pacific Islands, the diaspora is recent, as in Papua or Fiji, the 2 major centers of the diaspora outside New Zealand and Australia. There is a strong economic connection with the motherland, families are expanded and the flow of migrants is growing. Some election programs in these islands are clearly anti-Chinese and aim to reduce Chinese immigration.

The impact on the local economy is even stronger for Samoa, Tonga and Fiji, where the total population is less than one million. In 2006 and 2009, there were anti-Chinese riots in different islands as in 2006 in the Solomon Islands, Tonga or in 2009 in Papua New Guinea. Tensions are high, similar to recurring anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia.

In French Polynesia, the Chinese diaspora has a longer history, and is therefore better integrated into the Polynesian multicultural society. The Wan family symbolizes the economic wealth and success of the Chinese community. One of the specificities of this diaspora is to affirm its triple affiliation to the Polynesian, Chinese and French cultures. Some Hakka traditions still persist and the cultural connection to the motherland became official with the establishment of a general consulate in 2006 and the opening of a Confucius Institute in the facilities of the Public University in September 2013.

Checkbook diplomacy: how to monetize an exclusive recognition

Oceania is a field of continuous diplomatic dispute between the People's Republic of China (Mainland China) and the Republic of China (Taiwan). Indeed, while island populations represent only 0.1% of the world's population, it represents 7% of the votes in major international institutions.

The "One China" Policy

The official position of the Chinese government is that China is one and unified. According to this principle, Macau, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang are parts of this unified China.

Approximately 160 countries in the world support this One-China policy. Without this support, the PRC does not allow any commercial or diplomatic relations.

Anyone who wants to establish official relations with China must first abandon any formal recognition of Taiwan². A diplomatic war has therefore been declared between the PRC and its Chinese sister Taiwan to obtain an exclusive recognition, especially in some small African countries, Caribbean states and independent Pacific Islands. The main weapon of this war is money.

The checkbook diplomacy is a term used to describe the international politics openly using economical aids and international investments between two countries to conclude diplomatic agreements. The most significant example is the competition between China and Taiwan in the Pacific insular during the years 2000's³. However, the struggle between the two Chinas is unequal. Beijing has the unique vote of the United Nation and entertains its diplomatic relations throughout the planet. On the other hand, Taipei only has 25 embassies in the world. After 50 years of rivalries, the "One-China" rule remains the same, despite all the political and diplomatic ambiguities.

To face China's ever-growing influence in the Pacific, Taiwan is trying to preserve its geopolitical influence in the region. In 2006, the first regional summit was held in Palau, bringing together the 6 states officially recognizing Taiwan (Palau, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru Islands and Solomon Islands)⁴.

This diplomatic war is driven by two solid checkbooks and is not limited to international aid. The Salomon Islands' Prime Minister has been pushed to resign in 2006 after violent riots in the capital Honiara. His critics blamed him for filling his personal account with Taiwanese money, his opponent declaring at the same time his willingness to develop relations with Mainland China.⁵ Another similar example in 2004, the Vanuatu Prime Minister also resigned after revealing a secret deal with Taiwan⁶. Similar cases also took place in Papua New Guinea ⁷

The often corrupted politics of small pacific states are getting rich in altering diplomatic recognition by successive allegiance... Nowadays Beijing has two major advantages, the superiority of its economy and the opacity of its political system allowing unilateral decisions. The latest example is the official recognition of the PRC by Panama in 2017, a very strategic position for China because of the canal and its juncture between the Atlantic and the Pacific. The small Latin American state has therefore abandoned its relation with Taiwan.

The main question of the People's Republic of China is not diplomacy itself. The PRC government is aiming raw materials throughout the Pacific; hydrocarbons in Papua New

² The one China principle and the Taiwan issue, embassy of the PRC in the USA, 6 juillet 1993

³ Young Audrey, Checkbooks brought at Pacific forum » the New Zealand Herald, 21 octobre 2007

⁴ « Taiwan- Pacific Allies Summit to highlight regional issues », China post October 10 2007

⁵ « PM hails ties with Taiwan » Solomon Star, February 10 20010

⁶ « Chinese influence corrupting government opposition leader » Vanuatu Daily, March 12 2006

⁷ « spending money where it matters » Bruce Jacob, Taipei Times May 14 2008

Guinee, Wood in the Vanuatu and Salomon islands, future exploitation Rare earth in the Pacific sea bed. The implication of China in the Pacific is part of this energy quest process. To accomplish this, Beijing has become one of the aid donors in the Asia Pacific region by multiplying loans to Pacific states to develop their infrastructure

China's bilateral relation in the Pacific

Beyond the great diplomatic and political ideologies organized by Beijing to shine throughout the Asia Pacific region, we are now going to focus on China's bilateral relations with the different countries of the Pacific insular area in order to get a better understanding of the global Chinese strategy in the region.

In Melanesia: Natural resources issues

The islands of Melanesia are much wider than those of Polynesia or Micronesia. Most of them are mountainous region formed of sedimentary rocks and active volcanos. The immensity of those strategic regions, historically under Australia influence, obviously arouses keen interest of Beijing and creates many international tensions.

Due to its strategic position, Melanesia has been dominated by Australia and New Zealand until the 20th century. Still today, the two Anglophone powers remain the major donor of international aid in the region, often backed up by the ancient colonial power France and Great Britain. However the discovery of natural resources, attracts other neighboring countries including China.

The economic links between China and the Melanesian islands are in constant progression. Papua New Guinea a very rich country in Natural resources is now the biggest trade partner of China in Oceania. Its trade surplus with China reached 427 million Australian dollars in 2010⁸. China's political influence is growing. The instability and the economic poverty of the Melanesian states encourage Chinese intrusion in the domestic affairs. For example, in Fiji, unlike the western governments, China ignores the human rights problems for the benefit of mutual economical interest and sovereignty respect. This political subordination can quickly escalate. In 2006, tragic events occurred in the Chinatown of Honiara (Solomon Islands) where Chinese houses were burned and burgled. Those riots happened after controversial elections and rumors accusing Chinese business of corruption in the government⁹.

In this global context, New Caledonia, a French territory is in a different situation due to its economical and historical attachment to the French Republic. The French Collectivity

⁸ Pacific Trade with China » Solomon Star, 17 février 2011

⁹ Riots highlights Chinese tension, rioting in the Solomon, Penny Spiller, BBC News Friday 21 April 2006

can rightfully defend its economy and exceptional ecological heritage. China is often unconcerned about ecological matters when its energetic interest is at stake. New Caledonia can therefore avoid the tragic experience of the Salomon islands where deforestation has been an environmental tragedy.¹⁰

Micronesia: Allegiance of the micro islands

Micronesia is composed of several archipelagos located between the equator and the cancer tropic. There are about 2500 atolls and Volcano Islands but their land surface represents only 3 300 square meters on a total ocean surface of more than 8millions square meters. Just like the Melanesian, the Micronesians essentially live off a primary agriculture and artisanal fishing. The exploitation of natural resources, tourism and industrial fishing are taken in charge by foreign companies. Some islands like Nauru or Kiribati are independent states. Others are associating or federated to the United States via a particular status. Micronesia was historically of great interest for the USA during the World War II Pacific war. The military base of Guam is still today a key strategic point for the Us Navy to hold down the inexorable Chinese influence in the region.¹¹

The Micronesian region is interesting on a strategic perspective, as it will likely become in the near future a battlefield of influence between the PRC and the USA.

Sadly, the Micronesian populations are economically dependent on international assistance. Those small archipelagos have very few natural resources, and most of it is already depleted (like the Phosphate in Nauru). Their economic future is non-existent in a globalize free market economy that doesn't fit with their traditional way of life. The distress of its inhabitants and the ecological threats lead to massive emigration in Hawai'i and other American islands.

These dreadful observations don't stop the rest of the world from pursuing its quest to new interests. Micronesia is still the field of rivalries between, Taiwan, Australia and China that considers this region as a natural area of, influence. The American are Omnipresent, emphasizing their military superiority throughout the pacific.

In Polynesia

Polynesia is a large group of islands located in the southeast Pacific Ocean, form of the Polynesian triangle relating Hawai'i at North, New Zealand on the west and Pascua Island in the east. The population is about 5 million people (4.5 million in Hawai'i and New Zealand); a majority of the inhabitants are not ethnically Polynesians.

¹⁰ Global forest watch, Solomon Islands. Forestwatch.org

¹¹ " Navy Award Contract for future marine base on Guam" , Brian Skoloff, military.com 19 august 2017

19 territorial entities cohabit in this region, some states are independents, others are associated with foreign powers like the USA, France, New Zealand, Great Britain or Chili. 90 % of the global surface are territorial seas.

The people's republic of China, meticulously pilots its different bilateral relations with those entities. For example, a free trade agreement was signed with New Zealand in 2008 by Wen Jiaobo and New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark¹². This bilateral relation contrasts with the political tensions Beijing entertains with its other western partner. In Auckland, the government has privileged economic cooperation, without mentioning the human rights issue in China, a subject that is often showcased by American or Australian diplomats.

In the monarchy of Tonga and the Samoa, independent Polynesian countries, China develop its economic links with those island countries. Some observers have no hesitation in denouncing a dependency on the Chinese economy because of the important debt contracted to Chinese financial institution or humanitarian aid provided by the PRC¹³. This situation punctually results in massive discontent of the local population, in 2001 and 2006 racial riots took place in the Tonga china town (3000 to 4 000 Chinese citizens). The government immediately decided to cancel 600 working visas and later admitted that this decision was taken to dispel the racial hate towards the Chinese¹⁴

These ethnical tensions do not stop the PRC from entertaining its economic relations with the two countries. In 2010 the reconstruction of the business center of Nuku'alofa was financed by Chinese funds.¹⁵ The Chinese government voluntarily ignores the ethnical tensions and maintains pragmatic diplomatic relations.

In French Polynesia

The relations between French Polynesia and China are subject to a competition on the French territory for more than a decade between the major political protagonists. Each one accusing its opponents of a compromising attitude towards the Chinese government.

The Fenua (name of French Polynesia in local language) did not escape the checkbook diplomacy episode that struck the Pacific in the year 2000. The PRC government has continuously offered the services of the Chinese development bank to finance some

¹² Free trade agreement, just the start _ clark » The New Zealand Herald, 7 avril 2008

¹³ « Feature; China in the pacific » ABC Radio Australia, 4 April 2011

¹⁴ Feature; China in the pacific » ABC Radio Australia, 4 April 2011

¹⁵ Feature; China in the pacific » ABC Radio Australia, 4 April 2011

project on the territory (this financial institution is directly controlled by the government¹⁶).

Friendly gestures are numerous. The 4th of April 2001, the president Jiang Zemin visits Papeete, he is offered distinct honored by the president of the time Monsieur Gaston Flosse who will in return be invited in China. The same year, the ambassador of China in France, Mister Wu Jian Min visits a pearl farm with Robert Wan, richest person in Tahiti and symbol of the economic wealth of the Chinese community in French Polynesia. In 2002 Gaston Flosse goes to China with a delegation of 60 people, his interview with Jiang Zeming is broadcast on national TV. On their return, the main independent leader and rival of Gaston Flosse, Oscar Temaru declares “Flosse is selling Polynesia to the Chinese¹⁷”. At last, the 12 September 2007 a Chinese consulate is created in Punaauia, essential step in the diplomatic recognition of China.

When Oscar Temaru reaches the presidency in 2009, formerly very critical about China, he organizes a boat expedition “Tahiti Nui Freedom” which will lead Polynesian sailors from Tahiti to Shanghai (where the universal exposition is held) using traditional star navigation (this expedition retraces the other way around the pathway of the first Polynesian inhabitants). In 2010 he Visits China for three weeks, and claim at his return “we have to work with China”

The sino-Tahitian relations have accelerated in the last decade, with an official diplomatic recognition, and the multiplication of commercial projects, for example, a massive fish farm is under construction in the atoll of Hao in the Tuamotu archipelagos, entirely financed by Chinese funds. It will become the largest infrastructure in French Polynesia since the nuclear sites have been dismantled. Faithful to its pragmatic attitude towards its pacific neighbors, China takes advantage of the domestic political rivalries to develop its bilateral relations.

Australia, a defensive wall to the Chinese hegemony in the Pacific region

The Australian government claimed throughout the 19th century his legitimate protective role in the region towards foreign states by supporting young nations that demanded independence and escape the guardianship of ancient colonial powers: to some degree the same attitude is adopted with China today. Australia also actively participated in the creation of the “Forum of the Pacific Islands” in 1971, aiming at a bigger regional stability.

The relations between China and Australia have considerably evolved since the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1980's. The two countries are very

¹⁶ www.Chine-informations.com/banque+de+développement+de+Chine

¹⁷ ¹⁷ « Gaston, Oscar et les Chinois » Caroline Perdrix, www.lesnouvelles.pf

active in economic, political and cultural developments in the international organization like APEC (Asia Pacific economic cooperation) the EAS (East Asia Summit) or the G20.

Diplomatic relations were first established in 1972; nowadays China is the main economic partner of Australia that benefited the strong Chinese appetite in natural resources. Australian mining companies took advantage of the Chinese financial resources to invest in the energy sector. The recent signature of a free trade agreement the "CHAFTA" emphasizes this new strong economic relationship. The Australian, dependence on the Chinese demand in energy will obviously alter its geopolitical choices in the near future. The united states of America will closely analyze this evolution; they have a long historical military relation to Australia and are worried by China gaining more influence in what they consider a natural sphere of influence.

Will the Australian have to choose one day between the Chinese economical programs, or the American military protection? The future will tell, but Canberra will undoubtedly play a key diplomatic role in the future, and probably assume the position of mediator in the sino-us rivalry

The Pacific is changing rapidly Chinese influence has become the key element of this evolution. In less than 20 years; the Pacific region has become the direct neighbor of the most dynamical region in the world.

The Oceania economy, led by Australia is dependent on China's economic growth. The PRC's diplomacy is already based everywhere in the Pacific, redefining the geopolitical interest of the Asia-pacific region.

However the United states remain the most powerful military protagonist in the region. The ever-growing influence of China obviously worries the pentagon and forces the new Trump administration to redefine its geopolitical strategy in the region.

Once define by its remoteness from the big commercial road, the Pacific is progressively becoming a major geostrategic area and the evolution of the Sino- American competition

PACIFIC SEABED: MAJOR ENERGETIC ISSUE

In 2012, the earth population exceeded 7 billion people. The demographic projection forecasts over 9 billion people in 2050. Providing the necessary energy and natural resources for the development of human activity is a crucial question. Until now, almost all the energy resources arose from the exploitation of land surface (about 25 % of the earth's surface). In less than a century, a big part of those resources have been depleted. To maintain our lifestyle, the only solution is to search for resources somewhere else that is to say in the seabed

Mining exploitation in the Pacific has a long history, strictly associated with colonization and globalization. One can remember the phosphate in Makatea (French Polynesia), the nickel in New Caledonia (still exploited today). Many of the Melanesian countries are nowadays dependent on their productions of mining resources. In Papua New Guinea for example, this sector represents 75% of the exportations¹⁸.

The Pacific seabed is at the forefront of the international agenda; in the meantime the prices of raw materials are soaring. Multinationals specialized in exploiting raw materials have invested massively on new method of extractions. These projects arouse interest from the local governments, which are trying to better understand the economic, social and ecological effects of this race for energy.

The thirst for constant economic growth of the most powerful countries, imposed by a globalized liberal system and specially reinforced by the crisis, could redefine the strategic importance of the South Pacific; in fact, in the coming decades, the energy industry will have to face the drastic increase in world consumption, while taking into account the exhaustion or even the scarcity of resources.

The thirst for constant economic growth of the most powerful countries, imposed by a globalized liberal system and specially reinforced by the crisis, could redefine the strategic importance of the South Pacific; in fact, in the coming decades, the energy industry will have to face the drastic increase in world consumption, while taking into account the exhaustion or even the scarcity of resources.

In this context, the Asia Pacific regional Powers are going to express great interest regarding the Pacific seafloor in the near future. The extraction techniques are still not ready for exploitation, but we can reasonably consider that a scientific battle is going to take place between the major economic forces leading to new perspectives in the Pacific area. China of course will be one of the dominant players. France and its vast pacific territory will also play a non-negligible role.

Is China winning the rare earth War?

“The Middle East has oil, China has rare earth”, Deng Xiao Ping 1992

Rare earth elements are a group of 17 minerals mainly used in high technology equipment (cell phones, tablets, TV screen), ecological technologies like wind turbine or in the military industry. Once confidential, they are today massively used in our everyday life. They are essential for the high tech industry because of their electromagnetic properties; they are even used in paper money worldwide.

¹⁸ <https://pg.ambafrance.org/Presentation-generale>

Because of the terrible environmental impact, and the high cost of its production, the exploitation of rare earth elements has stopped almost everywhere apart from China. In Inner Mongolia, the local authorities have shown very little concern about the environmental issue. Since 2010 China has a virtual monopoly on rare earth production and it consumes almost half the world production. The PRC controls the rare earth element industry.

The other major consumers are Japan, the United States and Europe. Because of the Chinese monopoly, some economical tension has appeared. For example, Japan, the USA and the European Union have jointly complained to the world trade organization involving the limitations imposed by the Chinese government¹⁹.

Rare earth's exploitation has become a political asset for China. For example, the 7th of September 2010, a Chinese boat is intercepted in the Japanese territorial sea. The Chinese are humiliated, and Beijing decides to strike Japan's weak point. The 22 of September, the exportations of rare earth element to Japan are blocked. The high technology industries of Japan, ¼ of its economy are threatened. A banal maritime incident is turning into an economic catastrophe. Rare earth elements are a major component of China's powerful strategy. By limiting its importation; the largest consumers (USA, EU, and Japan) are forced to find alternative sources of supply.

The embargo is a shock, but the Chinese maneuver started 25 years ago, at this time the United States were the leading producer of rare earth element. Several small American and Canadian companies were bought by the Chinese government seizing at the same time their expertise.²⁰ The race to rare earth elements is also a component to the arms race symbolized by the Magnequench affair. The Indiana Society sold and relocated in China in 1995 was a producer of electromagnets for the American army. The Chinese have acquired an intellectual property and expertise that now directly threatens the American military complex. This Magnequench story illustrates a wider framework; the globalized world has pushed every economic player to produce at low cost. In less than 20 years, the American electromagnetic companies have lost 90 % of their employee²¹. The quota policy of the Chinese government is seen by the western world as a declaration of economical war. The rare earth elements are sold at a very high price throughout the world, but the Chinese government stabilizes the price in its domestic market. The American companies can no longer compete with their Chinese rivals. Henceforth, the race to speculation and profit already started

Deng Xiao Ping said in 1992 "the middle east has oil, China has rare earth". The rare earth elements are to our time, what oil was last century, driving a technological

¹⁹ Measures related to the exportation of Rare earths » WTO, retrieved 10 April 2015

²⁰ Guillaume Pitron et Serge Turquier « *La sale guerre des terres rares* »

²¹ « What the heck happened to the magnet industry, Walter T Beneckic, magnetic.com

revolution and encouraging the civil societies to rethink their way of exploiting resources. Other technological revolutions are at stake. In May 2017 the Chinese government announces that it had succeeded in extracting combustible ice from the sea floor²².

There is no doubt that in several decades the ocean floor will be exploited. It remains to be seen in which international and local legal framework. The extraction techniques are not ready for such exploitation nowadays, but we can reasonably suggest that a scientific battle will engage between the main protagonists of the pacific region. In this future battle, China will be the crux of the matter, being the biggest energy consumer.

Ecological risks and legal responses

Covering nearly 75% of the world's surface, the sea is a crucial issue.

The increasing risks of resource exploitation by man have led the international community to develop a common regime, in order to avoid conflicts between states as much as possible. There was therefore a codification of a right that was largely customary.

The first text adopted by an international institution to protect the seabed is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, adopted by the General Assembly on December 1982 at Montego Bay. The United States has still not ratified this convention, while the People's Republic of China ratifies the document on June 7 1996, two years before the European Union.

This convention specifies in particular the general principles of the exploitation of the sea resources. It also provides a compartmentalization of the Law of the Sea by adding four maritime zones to the zones defined previously: the archipelagic waters, the exclusive economic zone, the navigable straits, the seabed. For the latter, the Convention enshrines the membership of the seabed outside the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) in the World Heritage of Humanity but also specifies that the area escapes any appropriation and that it is considered as common property. Its use must be exclusively intended for peaceful acts and in the interest of all humanity.

The economic interest in the seabed, has pushed developed countries to negotiate the implementation of these provisions. Under pressure from the United States (remember that it was not a signatory to the convention), the agreement of 28 July 1998 establishes a system of collective appropriation through «The International seabed authority». This institution aims to organize and control all activities related to the mineral resources of

²² China Plus news, 18 mai 2017

the seabed. Eight states, including France have obtained exploration contracts in these areas from this authority. Its area of competence extends to all areas outside national jurisdictions (Exclusive Economic Zones).

The 1982 Convention has not yet fixed the Law of the Seabed and the process of negotiation related to future economic interests is continuous. Due to the rapid development of technological inventions in developed countries, it is to be feared that the seabed will gradually become the scene of fierce competition between the powerful nations of this world, or even of appropriation by certain states. This surely explains the attitude of the signatory countries of the 1982 Convention and the establishment of a common space, in other words an area without private property and assigned to the common use of all men, such as water, air, space etc.

What is concretely happening? The seabed will be exploited only by those who have the technological capacity. To this day the 8 entrepreneurs who have been allowed to explore the seabed area are of Russian nationality (Yuzhmorgeologiya), Indian via the government, French with the French research institute for the exploitation of the sea (Ifremer), the Japanese company Deep Ocean Resources Development, the Government of Korea and the Chinese Ocean Research and Development Association (COMRA).

Exploitation of the Pacific seabed reserves will not occur without China, which, as discussed above, often plays its economic role in capturing markets within the small island states of the Pacific; in this context, it is crucial that French Polynesia asserts its requirements with regard to the protection of its seabed. France has the second largest maritime territory in the world thanks to its Pacific territories and its exclusive economic zone could fan the desires of many Japanese, Chinese but also American investors. The economic outlook is therefore real, but the ecological risk is tremendous.

CONCLUSION

In this global context, the strategic influence of French Polynesia is increasing, a Japanese study has recently claimed that the seabed of Polynesia abounded rare earth elements, renewing the growing geostrategic issue in his region of the world

Undoubtedly, China will closely monitor the scientific development. Unlike the assertions of the western mainstream media, the Chinese government, political strategy is less aggressive than its rival from Washington; a future interference in the domestic politics of an important partner is not conceivable regarding its pragmatism. The government in Beijing expresses very little interest in Tahiti's potential independence, respecting the sovereignty of France. However, the PRC is a member of the special

committee the adopted in May 2013 a resolution placing French Polynesia on the list of “territories to be decolonized”.

In a hypothetical future independence, the Chinese would probably not hesitate to impose their economic dictate

It is important for the French state to get a clear understanding of the geostrategic issues in the Pacific.

For a long time on the edge of globalization, Oceania is now an essential geostrategic zone. The French state has become a regional power; it is the only way to avoid sino-american hegemony in the region. A sort of new “troisième voie”. ■

ASIA FOCUS #49

CHINA'S AMBITION IN THE PACIFIC: WORLDWIDE GEOPOLITICAL ISSUES

BY

PACO MILHIET

PHD STUDENT, INSTITUT CATHOLIQUE DE PARIS

NOVEMBER 2017

ASIA FOCUS

Collection supervised by Barthélémy COURMONT, research director at IRIS, lecturer at the Université Catholique de Lille, and Emmanuel LINCOT, professor at the Institut Catholique de Paris – UR “Religion, culture and society” (EA 7403) and Sinologist.

courmont@iris-france.org – emmanuel.lincot@gmail.com

ASIA PROGRAM

Supervised by Barthélémy COURMONT, research director at IRIS, lecturer at the Université Catholique de Lille.

courmont@iris-france.org

© IRIS

All rights reserved

THE FRENCH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AND STRATEGIC AFFAIRS

2 bis rue Mercoeur

75011 PARIS / France

T. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60

contact@iris-france.org

@InstitutIRIS

www.iris-france.org