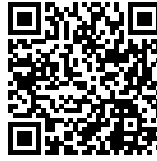




A TROPICAL STORM

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While the main tensions in the Indo-Pacific region are concentrated, others are ongoing and growing, in some visible critical points, such as Taiwan, the Pescadores islands, the Senkaku/Diaoyu/Diaoyutai, the islets of the South China Sea (Paracelsus). All this is because of powerful deployments and exchanges of fiery declarations between Beijing and its increasingly numerous competitors, gathered around the USA. The observant, silent eyes of Chinese leaders are looking for other opportunities to extend China's influence and its global near-monopoly on rare earth minerals and flex its muscles further. In short, there are specific and little-known situations that could have great, repercussions on a planetary level.

In this context, we want to talk about [New Caledonia/Kanak](#), [Bougainville](#) and [Tonga](#). These are three different territories, being groups of small archipelagos in the South Pacific. Not far away from each other, but all united by difficult economic and social situations, with important natural resources and strategic locations, different legal statutes and a turbulent political history. From a general point of view, the Chinese push towards those small islands, besides, as mentioned, trying to absorb the control of mineral resources (starting with the increasingly precious nickel), seems to retrace the great themes of Japanese expansion in the 20th century, to create a vast area of security, to ensure control of natural resources, to break the siege (including geographically) of the various barriers that stand between Beijing and free access to the Pacific, and to seriously undermine US control over these waters, unchallenged since the end of WWII.

A Small France Downunder

Let's start with a brief analysis of the situation in New Caledonia/Kanak, which is a French overseas territory from 1853 (and from 1864 until 1924 it was a tough penitentiary for insurgents and rebels against colonial rule, and for the survivors of the bloodbath of Paris's Commune). It has been included since 1986 in the list of non-autonomous territories to be decolonized by the UN, and which as such had the right to choose whether to become independent or remain linked to France (in the UN language peculiar to the UN, "non-selfgoverning territory means colonies and protectorates, of which there are now seventeen around the world, and which in majority are small islands scattered in several oceans, from Falklands/Malvinas to Gibraltar, from Saint Helena to New Caledonia).

The story of New Caledonia began a long time ago when an armed independence movement (of which Gaddafi was said to be the distant supporter and financier, as in other local states, such as Kiribati) carried out various actions against the military and police forces (and the French residents). A decisive

clash took place in April 1987, the terms of which are still unclear; but we only know that it was very dire for the insurgents.

After the use of force, the door was opened to dialogue, and Paris, with the agreements of [Hôtel de Matignon](#) (the residence of the French Prime Minister) in 1988, accepted "the opening to the peaceful demands of the local populations, who lived in difficult economic conditions and launched" development programs, and economic and social integration of the locals, even if their discontent with substantial marginalization in regards to residents of French origin, remained very much alive. The agreements of the Hôtel de Matignon of June 26, 1988 provided for a ten-year transitional statute that would lead to a referendum process of self-determination for Caledonians (local or French residents), to vote for or against independence.

In 1998, upon the expiry of the agreements of the Hôtel de Matignon, those of Nouméa (from the name of the head of the territory) were signed; alongside the regulation of the electoral process, concessions were made, such as, the name Kanak, which could be accompanied by that of New Caledonia and the use of a semi-official flag (which greatly angered the metropolitan French residents). France, which in any case tried in every way to postpone and limit the access of the local population to the voters list, and consequently to the referendum (actually three referendums, according to the terms of the [Nouméa Accord](#)). Also, Paris always demanded (and obviously obtained) that the election observers sent by the UN be called "experts," as there was nothing special to observe, as in other referendums for the independence of colonial territory (sic).

On December 12, again and for the third time (the other two were in 2018 and 2020) the vote was No to independence, and this time with very wide margin: 96.5% of the votes, while 3.5% were cast for the Yes-side. A landslide victory but very low participation. Out of about 185,000 registered voters, only 80,000 went to the 307 polling stations, or 43.88% of them. This was because of the boycott by the independentist movement (which controls the local government, however, with little responsibilities, leaving everything important in the hands of the French High Commissioner, directly appointed by Paris) who had unsuccessfully asked to postpone the vote because of the impact of COVID.

End of story? Certainly not. The problems remain, and the results of the vote show the ethnic split of the French territory, the numerical prevalence of the local element and which could be the source of future problems (and interference from the outside). Paris, in anticipation of the vote, silently and speedily sent 1,300 riot police (while many other similar forces were quickly deployed to Martinique

and Guadeloupe, recently devastated by violent riots; another sign of the problems that crisscross what remains of the French empire), and even the special units of the Gendarmerie, in the case of the repetition of the serious incidents of October 2020, and fears that the vote would divide the two communities that up till now lived together peacefully, after the crisis of the 1980s.

Now, after the self congratulations where he also said "France is more beautiful because New Caledonia has decided to stay in it," President Macron has several options ahead, both safe and uncertain. It is certain that France will have to try to invest much more financially than it has done till now to try to overcome the greatest reason for local discontent, the economic and social inequalities, while improving internal regional connections and with the Hexagon, and securing the mining assets of the territory, which will make it an economic hub in the future (in other words to ensure that nickel does not end up in Chinese hands, even through intermediary properties).

However, the low participation in the referendum undoubtedly removes the legitimacy of the vote even if Paris, with the results in hand, next year will try to have New Caledonia/Kanak removed from the list of territories to be decolonized at the UN General Assembly (and it is not guaranteed to succeed). Alongside this, if Paris wants to continue to be considered a player in the region, it must reinforce its military presence, reduced for years to a minimum level (to underline the importance of the archipelago, during the WWII, it hosted the largest US military installations of the South Pacific area) and do the same with neighboring Polynesia, also included in the list of territories to be decolonized by the UN General Assembly 2013 (again with furious reactions from Paris) and characterized by the presence of a local independence movement that has the same reasons as New Caledonia/Kanak.

Everything suggests that the French future in the area is not very easy, starting with the financial commitment that will have to be substantial and prolonged. Everything else is uncertain, and it is a lot. Those who are breathing a sigh of relief, so far, are the French residents (who feared, unreasonably, of being expelled in the event of a victory of the independence movement) and the people of Wallis and Futuna, two islets united to the territory who feared to pass from Parisian paternalism to local neo-colonialism; and they were clearly the only locals who voted against the option of independence. The USA, Australia and New Zealand had also followed the situation closely and feared that the independence of a small, sparsely populated state with great natural wealth would open the door to a dangerous rival. However, one can be sure that Beijing will continue to discreetly monitor the context and if, if the opportunity arises, it will not miss it.

A Difficult Chapter

Another difficult junction in the South Pacific is represented by the future of the island of Bougainville (whose name derives from the French admiral Louis Antoine de Bougainville who took possession of it in 1768). It is a tropical paradise, colonized and administered by Germans, Australians, Japanese, Americans and (again) Australians. The fate of the island has been linked to that of [Papua New Guinea](#), as this territory was first mandate of the League of Nations (1920-1941) and subsequently as territory under UN trusteeship from 1945 to 1975 (when it achieved independence), again from Australia.

Ethnically, the population of the island is closer to that of the neighboring [Solomons](#) (who, as we shall see, are going through difficult times) than to that of Papua New Guinea. The problems emerged immediately after the independence of Papua New Guinea. Because Bougainville is rich in copper and gold, a large mine was established in [Panguna](#) in the early 1970s by Bougainville Copper Limited, a subsidiary of the large multinational [Rio Tinto](#). Regional residents' disputes with the company over negative environmental impacts, failure to share financial benefits, and negative social changes brought about by the mine have led to a local awakening of a secessionist movement that had hitherto been dormant (as can be seen, a red thread links the requests of Bougainville and New Caledonia/Kanak).

A group of local activists proclaimed the independence of Bougainville as the 'Republic of Northern Solomon' in 1975 and again in 1988; both times government forces suppressed the insurgents, called [BRA](#) (Bougainville Revolutionary Army). The second uprising was particularly violent and led to at least 20,000 victims (and Papua New Guinea's employment of Sandline "contractors," given the poor quality of its military and police forces) and which ended with a peace agreement that saw the sending of an Australian-led multinational stabilization force ("[Operation Bel Isi](#)"), the [PMG](#) (Peace Monitoring Group) which operated between 1998 and 2003. The PMG (and its substitute the [Peace Monitoring Team](#), which ended its activity in 2005) which oversaw personnel, military police and civilians from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Vanuatu, cooperated with a small UN civilian mission, the [UNPOB](#) (UN Political Office in Bougainville) which operated to facilitate dialogue and the destruction of insurgent weapons (about 2,000 of all kinds), to respect agreed pre-electoral deadlines, and, finally, to facilitate the elections themselves.

The UNPOB ended its mission in 2005, leaving the normal economic and social assistance and aid activities of the "less advanced territories" (as the UN calls these territories) with the [UNDP](#) (UN

Development Program) as leading agency. The politically relevant aspect of the 1997 agreement (which prepared peace on the ground) led parties to decide to hold a referendum on the political independence of the island in the future, which would have a regional government with wide autonomy—all under careful Australian supervision, as Canberra, given the geographical proximity and the great economic interests of the area, is particularly interested in any development in the area.

A non-binding independence referendum was held at the end of 2019 with 98.31% of votes for independence rather than autonomy within Papua New Guinea; and, as a result, the region will become independent by 2027 (and this with all due respect to the concept of a “non-binding” referendum. But Papua New Guinea is so weak that it has little to oppose, even given the overwhelming majority in favor of independence; and Canberra does not like other convulsions in the area).

In principle, the aspirations for independence always have positive consideration and sympathy, at least formally. In reality, the international community looks at them with suspicion for the precedents they can create elsewhere, with balkanization and destabilization in tow. However, the latest developments seem to lead to an acceleration of the independence process, which the regional government of Bougainville wants to be effective as soon as possible (the ideal would be even before 2025). Australia, and first of all, New Zealand, the USA and France are observing the process very carefully, which should be peaceful (and at the moment everything suggests that it will continue to be so), but which could bring about another small, weak and potentially unstable territory at the behest of other interests (also in this case Chinese).

Australia, which has a difficult relationship, to use a euphemism, with Beijing, absolutely does not want Chinese economic agents to settle there to make Bougainville an outpost of the CCP's imperialism. However, it is useful to remember a paradox (international relations are full of them): Papua New Guinea, which seems resigned to let Bougainville go (also because it has no other options) finds itself in the situation where the western part of the island would like to separate from Indonesia and reunite with Port Moresby, starting with the ethnic community.

However, Indonesia, which took control of that part of Papua (the last remnant of Dutch colonialism) in 1964, with a real diplomatic coup orchestrated by the USA and with the acquiescence of the UN (ignoring the wishes of the local populations and annexed to Indonesia regardless of their opinions on the matter), mindful of the disasters of East Timor and, conversely, of the prudent management of separatism in the Aceh region (eastern part of Sumatra), has opted for a conciliatory and inclusive

policy, which has brought good results by calming the situation and fully reintegrating Aceh into Indonesia.

Another Outbreak

At the end of last November, the Solomon Islands also returned, albeit briefly, to international prominence. The reason was that very violent incidents broke out between the local population and the local security forces. On a geographically small scale, the capital [Honiara](#) is little more than a large town. The local government in obvious difficulty has asked for the support of neighboring countries.

Again, Australia, followed by New Zealand, Fiji and (even) Papua New Guinea, answering a desperate request by the government of Solomon Islands, sent military and police personnel with the greatest possible urgency sent a force, which although numerically small (less than 500 units), represents how serious was the violence in a small community. The Solomon Islands also emerged from a long period of instability and violence, and appeared to be stable. But the agreements were only superficial and the reasons for the difficulties remained intact, if not worsened.

What caused the riots? In apparently enchanting places (for tourists), realities are harsh. The ongoing antigovernment protests over long-standing poverty and unemployment turned violent in mid-November as crowds tried to storm parliament. Rioters burned down buildings and destroyed property in the Chinatown area of Honiara. At least three people were killed. Although calm was largely restored, tensions remain high.

But inter-provincial tension has also fueled the unrest, as many of the protesters came from the province of [Malaita](#), a neighboring island that has a history of disputes with the Guadalcanal province, where the government is based. For example, Malaita opposed the current Prime Minister's decision, in 2019, to formally recognize China instead of Taiwan.

In addition, various local authorities, starting with the provincial leader of Malaita, have spoken out against the presence of international troops, seen as supporting the central government. Even though the riots lasted only three days, they plunged the Solomon Islands into chaos, exposing widespread frustration with low living standards and exposing the weaknesses of local governance. Despite years of investments from abroad, especially by Australia, the Solomon Islands have not emerged from the

quagmire of the lack of development and the violence that marked the small former British protectorate (independent since 1976) between 1998 and 2003.

Canberra—cautious in not repeating a deployment of a stabilization force (the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, [RAMSI](#)) which remained in place for 14 years and which ended only in 2017—(but at the same time vigilant of Beijing maneuvers and lest its agents are installed there) stressed that this time they will remain in the islands only for a limited period.

As mentioned, the reasons for the violence have not been overcome and date back to the late 1990s, when ethnic rivalries and economic differences were the spark of very serious and prolonged violence, where the inhabitants of various peripheral islands confronted and then clashed, in measures more and more violent, with those of Honiara. Tensions led to the establishment of ethnic militias; and in late 1999, after several failed attempts to broker a peace agreement, the then prime minister declared a four-month state of emergency and also requested assistance from Australia and New Zealand. But his appeal was denied.

Meanwhile, violence was rampant in the archipelago. After several attempts, an agreement was reached between the parties, promoted by Canberra and signed in the Australian city of Townsville in 2000. The economic situation of poor islands worsened and, as often happens, the violence of politics is connected with ordinary crime; and such was the instability that in July 2003, over 2,000 military and policemen from Australia and other Pacific islands (Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Nauru, Kiribati, Tuvalu) arrived in the Solomon Islands under the auspices of RAMSI (divided into the phases "Helpem Fren," "Anode" and "Rata"). With the arrival of international forces, the security situation improved, but with over two hundred deaths (very few compared to what happened in nearby Bougainville). In reality, the Solomon Islands are close to the condition of a "failed state."

This draws the attention of those who may be interested in increasing influence. The current Prime Minister, as often happens in such situations, has accused foreign powers and "certain elements" that seek to overthrow his government, indicating opposition to his decision to move closer to Beijing and break ties with Taiwan. Perhaps. But the real problems all remain, from underdevelopment to corruption, from entire economic sectors in the hands of (Chinese) ethnic groups that have a monopoly on the local market. The Solomon Islands remain one of the most aid-dependent countries in the world. 40% of the population is under the age of 14, according to data from the World Bank, and it is estimated

that 70% are under the age of 30. Unemployment is endemic and the restrictions for Covid-19 have made everything, if possible, even more difficult.

Compared to what is proposed for New Caledonia/Kanak and Bougainville, interesting from a mining point of view, the Solomon Islands are less attractive. Gold mining began in 1998 at Gold Ridge on the island of Guadalcanal, which was suspended in 2006. The islands are potentially rich in undeveloped mineral resources, such as lead, zinc, nickel and gold. But the real strength of the Solomons is the geographical position, although regional relations are not optimal. In addition to Australia and New Zealand, which play a predominant role in the security-making of the area, Papua New Guinea has a problematic relationship with Honiara, accused by [Port Moresby](#) of pushing for Bougainville separatism in order to establish a unitary state among the two entities. So far, Australia does not want to go beyond a neutral peacekeeping force and does not want to mediate between opposing tendencies (ultimately for or against Beijing).

Conclusions?

In fact, it is difficult to draw a conclusion. What is certain is only that the situation is open. The players (Beijing on one side and the "others" on the opposite side) are in full swing and are trying to strengthen their positions. For example, in mid-December, the USA launched a major program to improve the infrastructure networks of communication, fundamental for the socio-economic development of territories spread over vast areas. But they are viewed with suspicion. Let's wait, see (and hope).

Enrico Magnani, PhD is a UN officer who specializes in military history, politico-military affairs, peacekeeping and stability operations. (The opinions expressed by the author do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations).

[Featured image](#): "Buka Town," by Vireil, painted ca. 1988-2001.

