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AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO CHINA IN 2023: CANBERRA'S DECISIONS AND ROLES

Evgeniya Yu. KATKOVA¹, LIU Jianqi², WU Haichao³

^{1,2,3} Patrice Lumumba RUDN University, Moscow, Russia,

¹ katkova-eyu@rudn.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2855-3163>

² liujianqi0422@gmail.com

³ whc_immortal@163.com

Abstract: The power change in the Asia-Pacific area have a significant impact on China and the United States in 2023, and the fight between superpowers and emerging countries push the Sino-American game into uncharted territory. Is Australia, as a shared partner between China and the United States, to continue to choose the US-Australia alliance to restrict China in the face of such a «dilemma»? Or do Australia prefer the economic gains brought about by China's rise? The role of Australia has become unclear. This paper takes this Australian Prime Minister's visit to China as an entry point to deeply analyse the complexity of the multilateral relationship between China, the United States and Australia, and conducts research through textual analysis and other methods, and finds that behind the Australian Prime Minister's visit to China it is driven by national interests, and also by the influence of the changes in China-United States relations that make Australia take action, and that Australia will potentially serve as a mitigating agent between China and the United States. The research in this paper is more helpful to understand the value of Australia in the Sino-US relationship and the political significance of the Australian Prime Minister's visit to China.

Keywords: *China-Australia relations; Prime Minister's visit, U.S.-Australia alliance, Asia-Pacific region, security, trade, normalization of bilateral relations*

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Научная статья. Политические науки

ВИЗИТ Э. АЛЬБАНЕЗЕ В КИТАЙ В 2023 Г. КАК ТОЧКА БИФУРКАЦИИ КИТАЙСКОГО-АВСТРАЛИЙСКИХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

Евгения Юрьевна КАТКОВА ², ЛЮ Цзяньци, У Хайчао

^{1,2,3} РУДН им. Патриса Лумумбы, Москва, Россия,

¹katkova-eyu@rudn.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2855-3163>

²liujianqi0422@gmail.com

³whc_immortal@163.com

Аннотация: Продолжающийся транзит власти в Азиатско-Тихоокеанском регионе и борьба между двумя сверхдержавами оказывает существенное влияние на все страны региона. В свете этих событий политика Австралии претерпевает большие изменения. Продолжит ли Канберра свою антикитайскую политику или предпочтет экономические выгоды, вызванные подъемом Китая? В этой статье авторы рассматривают визит премьер-министра Австралии Энтони Альбанезе в Китай в 2023 г. в качестве отправной точки для детального анализа отношений в треугольнике Австралия – Китай – Соединенные Штаты. Авторы приходят к выводу, что визит Э. Альбанезе в Китай обусловлен национальными интересами и стал возможен благодаря изменениям в китайско-американских отношениях, которые позволили Австралии смягчить свою политику в отношении КНР. Данное исследование вносит вклад в понимание последних трендов в австралийско-китайских отношениях, роли китайско-американских отношений для политики Австралии и политического значения визита премьер-министра Австралии в Китай в 2023 г. для дальнейшего развития диалога между Канберрой и Пекином.

Ключевые слова: китайско-австралийские отношения, визит премьер-министра, австралийско-американский альянс, Азиатско-Тихоокеанский регион, безопасность, торговля, нормализация двусторонних отношений

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Introduction

With ups and downs since Australia and China first established diplomatic relations 51 years ago, the relationship was upgraded to a «comprehensive strategic partnership» in 2014 by the president of China and the prime minister of Australia. But following 2017, the two nations' relationship began to rapidly deteriorate. Australia denounced China's interference in its political affairs, and the Turnbull administration went so far as to threaten China with the Anti-Foreign Intervention Act in 2018. The Australian government continued to chastise China in the following years over its protection of human rights, the spread of the New Crown Virus, and other issues, which led to a tendency towards confrontation. In response, Xinhua News Agency issued a strong statement, pushing the two sides of the bilateral relationship to the point of collapse¹.

It is worth noting that Australia's position on China is the same as that of the United States within the framework of the two-state alliance. Since 2017, Australia has contributed to the United States' strategy of great power rivalry as the so-called «flag bearer of the Indo-Pacific». During this period, Australia spared no effort to create friction and disputes in China affairs: from the so-called «coercive diplomacy» to the «Asian Monroe Doctrine», to the «Quadripartite Security Dialogue» (QUAD), the «Trilateral Security Partnership between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia» (AUKUS), and from the «Great Power Balance» to the «Selection of Sides for Checks and Balances strategy»². The current Australian Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, visited China in November 2023, ending a seven-year hiatus in which China had not had an Australian Prime Minister visit. Albanese stated that the tour was to honour the 50th anniversary of Australian Prime Minister Edward Gough Whitlam's first visit to China in 1973, adding that Prime Minister Whitlam's historic visit created a firm basis for the two nations' relations. The momentous visit created the groundwork for the two countries' diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties. It still benefits both Australia and China today. The «friendly» signals that were made public before to the visit were warmly received by the Chinese authorities. However, given that the United States and China are now in a dangerous place, the Australian government's abrupt display of goodwill can't help but make people feel «intriguing», which might mean that Australia will be re-elected for a different future. Could this be seen as a fresh decision for the future of Australia? And what should Australia's medium-sized nation do going forward in this delicate era of shifting global power dynamics and struggle between the old and developing superpowers?

Australia's «friendly» signals to China in the area of Sino-Australian relations are motivated by the «economic» factor, and the economic sector has produced the majority of the major accomplishments in Sino-Australian development and cooperation. On the other hand, given the tenets of the US-Australia alliance, Australia's selection as a middle power is especially significant given the conflict between the US and China. In order to determine the primary political significance of Australia's current friendly signals, this paper examines the motivations behind the significant Albanese visit to China. It concludes that Australia's decision to shake hands with China at this time is consistent with its national strategy and serves as a buffer between China and the United States, allowing Australia to obtain a more stable development environment in the Asia-Pacific region during the handover of power.

Security Concerns and Options in Australia – Alliance between the United States and Australia

In analysing Australia's concerns, the key point to be made is to look at the theory of the middle power, which international relations scholar Dai Weilai (戴为来) suggests is the realist perspective in which the key identifier of a middle power is its «position». This is because in a realist system of power politics, a hierarchical structure naturally exists, and the middle powers are in the «middle» between the large and the small, and their power can be quantified in terms of material capabilities and attributes³. Australia, as a middle power, did not place «national development» at the top of its strategy. Rather, it is the «survival» of the state, not in terms of its form of existence, but in terms of maintaining a stable strategic position in the context of the geopolitical conflicts of international competition that an «intermediate position». As the continent at the end of the archipelago in South-East Asia, Australia's primary geopolitical imperative is to maintain a common security and stable balance in East Asia, which is the foundation of Australia's security and prosperity⁴. The United States has structural power in the world as the only post-World War II superpower, and an alliance with the United States is a crucial strategic option for Australia to stabilize the South Pacific environment and safeguard its own security.

With the ratification of the ANZUS Treaty in 1951, the United States and Australia became true allies. Successive US and Australian governments have appreciated their close ally, and the fact that they are not on the same side of the ocean has not prevented bilateral relations from developing. Since 1985, Washington and Canberra have held annual ministerial consultations (AUSMIN). Its most senior defence and foreign policy offi-

cially to discuss and coordinate their approaches to international issues and to «deepen bilateral diplomatic security and defence cooperation»⁵. The 60-year US–Australian alliance was hailed by then US President Barack Obama during his 2011 visit, who called it «unbreakable» and «indispensable» and declared that the US would maintain its alliance with Australia as part of its future strategy to reenter the Asia-Pacific region. The then Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott, welcomed the announcement, saying «The United States is Australia's best friend and strongest ally, and the President of the United States will always be our most welcome and honoured guest»⁶. However, the transfer of power in the Asia-Pacific region underwent an important change, after the 9/11 incident, the U.S. government put its strategic focus on the global counter-terrorism content, which gave China a golden opportunity to leapfrog development.

In 2003, Hu Jintao, then President of the Chinese government, continued Jiang Zemin's political advocacy and actively adhered to the «road of peaceful development». Meanwhile Chinese international relations scholars have warned that China is facing increasing containment from the United States, the only remaining superpower, to prevent the rise of any emerging power capable of challenging its hegemony⁷. This opinion has also been supported by subsequent tensions between China and the United States, which saw the Obama administration adopt the slogan «returning to the Asia-Pacific» in 2013, the Trump administration take over Obama's voluntary decision to continue the trade war with China in the Asia-Pacific region, and the Biden administration push the conflict between the two countries into a more serious area during its tenure. Australia, situated far away in the South Pacific, realised that the instability in the Asia-Pacific region would conflict with the South Pacific region, seriously affecting Australia's development environment. The Canberra government's unease stemmed from this shift in power dynamics in the power struggle between the old superpowers and the emerging powers.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) 2022 report, China has the world's second highest share of military spending (13%), while the United States has the biggest share (39%)⁸. For instance, China's military build-up in the South China Sea area has increased significantly. In 2018, China tested its first Type 055 guided-missile destroyer at sea, and in 2019, the destroyer Nanchang was inspected during a sea parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of the People's Navy's founding. The destroyer was then incorporated into the navy's forces⁹. China officially enacted the Law of the People's Republic of China on

Maritime Police in 2021, further solidifying its authority over the South China Sea and granting the Chinese maritime police more authority to enforce maritime laws. These are all clear signs that China wishes to develop a strong military presence in the Asia-Pacific area, including the South China Sea. Some Western international relations scholars have suggested that China's power has destabilised the Asia-Pacific region, with Thomas J. Christensen (2011) describing China's efforts to play a dominant role in regional affairs, stating that China has also «undermined the U.S.-China relationship in the process»¹⁰. The conflict between China and the United States in the Asia-Pacific region has made Australia anxious, hence Australia has increased its security cooperation with the United States. Different political ideologies and attitudes towards growing countries, particularly China, have influenced Australia's trust in China, and the US, which has the same Anglo-Saxon culture as its old partner, is a more capable and trustworthy option.

The visit of Albanese to China – Australia's Role

On 4 November 2023, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese arrived in Shanghai for a four-day visit to China, where he was received by the Chinese government at the airport with the highest level of hospitality, and in fact was welcomed by the Chinese government prior to his visit to China. On 4 August 2023, China's Ministry of Commerce announced that it would stop imposing anti-dumping duties and countervailing duties on Australian barley, and the Australian government responded by returning three pieces of Chinese cultural relics and artefacts to China on 25 October 2023¹¹, which was a bilateral sign of goodwill that paved the way for a handshake for the Prime Minister's visit to China. China and Australia have had more conflict since their bilateral ties deteriorated in 2017. Neither country has benefited from the confrontation, which has resulted in economic sanctions and political abuse. Interestingly, an official Australian briefing note detailing the bilateral relationship with China states that the two sides are still growing in terms of economic and commercial cooperation: China represents about one-third of Australia's global trade (32.2%), making it the country's largest two-way trading partner in products and services. Australia's two-way trade with China climbed 6.3% to \$267 billion in 2020–21, while the country's two-way commerce globally decreased by

5.0% over the same year. In 2020–21, we exported \$178 billion worth of goods and services to China, a 6.2% rise from 2019–20. This rise is mostly the result of rising merchandise exports, which increased by 10.8% in 2020–21 in spite of various trade restrictions in China (Table 1). Albanese's visit to China to attend the 2023 China International Import Expo in Shanghai, China, where he tasted some of the products in the Australian goods section and introduced Australian wine and other products to traders, it is not difficult to see that the focus of Albanese's visit to China continues to be on building bilateral relations around 'trade and commerce'.

Table 1. Australia's top-10 two-way trading partners in 2022 (A\$ million)

№	Country	2020	2021	2022	% share of total	% growth	
						2021 to 2022	5 year trend
1	China	246,3	282,3	299,3	24,9	6	9,7
	<i>Hong Kong (SAR of China)</i>	12,1	11,4	14,2	1,2	25,1	-8,0
2	Japan	66,3	87,2	147,3	12,3	68,8	10,1
3	United States	73,1	68	87,3	7,3	28,2	2,5
4	Republic of Korea	34,8	51	81,8	6,8	60,4	7,3
5	Singapore	26,5	36,1	52,8	4,4	46,5	11,5
6	India	24,3	34,3	48,4	4,0	41,1	8,9
7	Taiwan	16,2	23,8	42,7	3,6	78,9	18,3
8	Malaysia	19,3	23,3	33,3	2,8	42,8	6,1
9	New Zealand	23,7	24,4	31,3	2,6	28,6	-0,5
10	Germany	21,4	22,8	29,2	2,4	27,8	4,3

Source: Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. URL: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australias-goods-and-services-by-top-15-partners-2022.pdf>

Australia is identified in China's literature on international relations as a possible partner who shares China's «core interests» in advancing «peace» and «prosperity» in the Asia-Pacific region. China has long viewed Australia as a long-term strategic partner. Chinese foreign policy-makers have presented a strategy that emphasises relations with major powers as China rises to become the world's second-largest economy in 2009, prioritising the neighbourhood and basing itself on the developing world. The Chinese government is well aware that China needs a secure and stable neighbourhood for its long-term development. China is a country with a large land area and a large sea area. Despite security conflicts resulting from territorial disputes in the South China Sea, Australia has always been seen by China as a potential security partner because both govern-

ments see an Australian and a stable geopolitical environment as beneficial to their countries' development.

Simultaneously, Sino-Australian ties are significantly impacted by the evolution of Sino-American relations. Since the US administration's battle with China for hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region began, Australia has faced a foreign policy conundrum. In order to defend American positions on free navigation in the South China Sea, Australia has sent military aircraft there in 2015. On the one hand, Australia adheres to American «anti-China» ideology and constantly fights China alongside the United States. On the other hand, Australia considers China's long-standing trade partnership when deciding whether or not to join the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and ultimately filed a formal application for membership in the Asian Investment Bank in 2015. Australia's diplomatic quandary of being trapped between China and the US might be envisioned by attaching its security to the US but favouring China for economic development. According to Zhang Jian, a specialist in Chinese international relations, Australia is doubtful of its capacity to adjust to the rising influence of a more strong and affluent China. Australia is likely to encounter strong pressure from Washington to support USA should significant strains in US–China relations resurface, particularly on the Taiwan dispute. Canberra's management of its alignment with Washington on foreign and security policy matters, as well as its economic relationship with Beijing, will therefore continue to be a challenging balancing act¹².

It is then easy to understand why the Australian Prime Minister is making an international diplomatic visit to China during the sensitive period of confrontation between China and the United States in 2023 – that is, in line with the country's strategic development values and the need to stabilise the geopolitical security environment (Asia-Pacific, Indo-Pacific). Here is a quote from Diao Daming, a scholar from a Chinese think tank institution, on the bilateral relationship between China and Australia. He believes that Australia's diplomacy between China and the United States is coloured by «flexibility», and that Australia's role can be shifted flexibly according to domestic and international circumstances. In the Asia-Pacific area, for instance, Australia can function as a «co-operator» during times of good relations between China and the US, and as a «follower» of the US–Australia alliance or a «bridge» between the two during times of tension¹³. China and the United States have been in the same situation for a very long time. According to this perspective, Albanese's visit to China may serve as a «bridge» in light of the current tensions between China and the United States as well as the unstable situation in the Asia-Pacific region. Australia

will also serve as the best buffer between China and the United States during the conflict.

What transpired between China and Australia prior to the visit is important to discuss because this diplomatic visit by Australian Prime Minister Albanese to China is historic for both countries and will signal a minor shift in their bilateral relationship.

Under Coalition leader Scott John Morrison's administration, bilateral relations between China and Australia have hit a freezing point, with a crisis of confidence in the Chinese government over both Australia's attitude towards China's Taiwan affairs and its diplomatic rhetoric on the New Crown Virus, which led to a statement from China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) in May 2021 that «indefinitely suspends the mechanism of the China-Australia Strategic Economic Dialogue», which was clearly a round of sanctions against the Coalition by China¹⁴. In response to the Chinese remark, the former Federal Trade Minister of Australia, Dan Tehan, expressed displeasure but also stated that «Australia remains open to dialogue and engagement at the ministerial level»¹⁵. Since then the Morrison government has called the Chinese government several times to request dialogue, but all have been rejected by the Chinese government, and it was not until May 2022, when the Labor government won the Australian federal election, that the Chinese government changed its diplomatic attitude towards Australia.

Long before Albanese's visit to China, high-level Sino-Australian dialogue resumed after the Australian election (2022). The first ministerial meeting between China and Australia since 2019 took place when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong met in November 2022 in Bali during the G20 Leaders' Summit. Wong and Albanese's subsequent travels to China were made possible by the high-level discussions between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Australian Prime Minister Albanese that took place on the summit's fringes. The visit, which took place in November of the same year and marked the first meeting between China's and Australia's top leaders in five years, resulted in a shift in the two countries' bilateral relationship. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs also released a statement in December 2022 titled «Joint Statement on the Outcome of the China-Australia Diplomatic and Strategic Dialogue», which reiterated the political outlook of the two countries' relationship, stating that «a stable and constructive China-Australia relationship is the positioning of China-Australia bilateral strategic partnership». A high-level discussion about Australia and China's bilateral relations will also be started at the same time. Topics to be covered include defence, re-

gional and global issues, consular affairs, trade and commerce, and climate change¹⁶. In terms of dialogue mechanisms, the two statements with very different attitudes indicate the Chinese government's new expectation of the Labour government to normalise bilateral relations between China and Australia as a top diplomatic priority and clear the way for Albanese's visit to China in 2023.

According to the above geopolitical perspective, Australia needs to rebuild diplomatic relations with China in order to establish stability in the South Pacific, which is contingent upon the improvement of security in the surrounding area. But in February 2022, something called the «Russian Special Military Operation against Ukraine» took place, which changed the geopolitical landscape of the world dramatically. For starters, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has dramatically heightened the geopolitical and security game between the United States and Russia. The United States-led Western countries, in particular, have imposed severe sanctions on Russia while arming Ukraine with massive quantities of advanced weapons, effectively turning the Russian-Ukrainian conflict into a proxy war between the United States and Russia, with Ukraine serving as a proxy¹⁷.

The second is the intensification of confrontation between China and the U.S. On 24 February 2023, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs published «China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis», which clearly expresses China's peaceful proposition for a peaceful settlement of the Ukrainian crisis, as well as China's adherence to the political path of peaceful opposition to hegemony¹⁸. Of course, whether the Chinese government is resolving the Ukrainian crisis politically or insisting on opposing hegemony, it has been opposed by the Biden administration, which has also demanded that China not supply Russia with weapons or assist Russia in alleviating economic sanctions, among other things, to which the Chinese government pays no attention and continues to insist on its independent foreign policy.

Lastly, the bilateral ties that exist between Russia and China. Following Russia's special military operation against Ukraine, the United States and other Western nations have imposed numerous sanctions on Russia in a variety of fields, including the military, economic, scientific and technological, and the humanities. In response, the Russian government has imposed countersanctions, one of which is the peg of the Russian rouble to «domestic products and gold». «The West wants to turn Russia into an outcast in the international community through these «hellish» sanctions, and turn the rouble into scrap paper», said Zhang Weiwei, director of the China Research Institute at Fudan University. Russia has simply begun a subversive

revolution by tying essential commodities such as Russian natural gas to the ruble and gold, transforming the West's currency war into a «war of goods and currencies»¹⁹.

Following that, Russia's economy demonstrated strong resilience and increased economic and trade cooperation as well as political exchanges with China, and in 2023, the top leaders of China and Russia successfully conducted a bilateral state visit, and in the current international political landscape, China and Russia have taken on the role of a great power as a permanent member of the United Nations. Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2023 op-ed in Rossiyskaya Gazeta and on the website of the Russian news agency RIA Novosti, entitled «Forging ahead, opening a new chapter of Sino-Russian friendship, cooperation and common development», mentions that, on the economic front, «Sino-Russian bilateral trade in 2022 exceeded US\$190 billion, an increase of 116 per cent compared with the figure 10 years ago, and China has been the number one trading partner country of Russia for the thirteenth consecutive year», and that on the political front, «high-level exchanges have played an important role as a strategic guide, and political trust between the two sides is constantly being consolidated, thus creating a new paradigm of relations between major countries»²⁰. The Chinese government has expressed its sincere appreciation for China and Russia's successes in politics, economy, and trade, and it looks forward to the future. It can be seen that the US plan to impose constraints on Russia through Ukraine failed, and even the US had to provide more military assistance to Ukraine, putting the US deep in the quagmire of the incident, causing the US and China in the Asia-Pacific region to slow down competition.

In 2023, the United States launched a diplomatic offensive against China, with a series of high-level U.S. officials visiting China, including U.S. Secretary of State Antony John Blinken and U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Janet Louise Yellen, who expressed the United States' voice on the construction of an effective U.S.-China communication mechanism and U.S.-China cooperation in the field of global governance prior to the visit, which means that to stabilise. As a US ally, Australia has naturally caught the political winds, and with the US mired in the Russia-Ukraine crisis and little time for a deeper fight with China, there is an opportunity to rebuild Sino-Australian relations. Of course, Albanese, as a close friend of the US, visited the US before going to China, and the White House provided its implicit support to Albanese's diplomatic efforts in China. John Kirby, the White House NSC Strategic Communications Coordinator, told a White House press briefing that he «fully supports and understands the Premier's

desire to meet with President Xi and to travel to Beijing» because «it's very important to have a dialogue with the Chinese and to keep the lines of communication open»²¹. As a result, when the Chinese government sent positive signals to the Labour Party and the US tried to stabilise the relationship between China and the US, Albanese travelled to China, resulting in the development of Sino-Australian relations.

Conclusion

This article aims to investigate the rationale behind the Australian prime minister's trip to China as well as the visit's political significance during this delicate period of tension between China and the US. According to the study, China and Australia share similar strategic intentions at the level of diplomatic strategy, namely to «stabilise the surrounding environment and create the need for development», which is a major factor in the Australian Prime Minister's current visit to China. Furthermore, given the complexity of the bilateral and multilateral relationships between China and Australia, as well as the US and China, Australia is also more likely to have positive political values embodied in the US–China confrontation. These relationships are based on the US–Australia alliance, in which the US is the most trusted partner in bilateral relations, and the China-Australia strategic partnership, in which both countries have the greatest national interest in economic development. This suggests that, in the process of power transfer in the Asia-Pacific region, between China and the United States of America, Australia must clearly understand its own «position» and, on that basis, strive to play a role in the stability of the Asia-Pacific environment. Finally, the Chinese government's different attitudes towards the Australian Coalition and the Labour Party imply that China is banking on Labour Leader Albanese to restore Sino-Australian relations. The first high-level meeting between China and Australia occurred at the Bali Summit in 2022, and the visit of Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong to China that year completed some of the basic mechanisms for political dialogue, paving the way for the Prime Minister's visit the following year. In addition to the political necessity between China and Australia that drove the Australian Prime Minister's visit to China, the factor between China and the United States was also a catalyst for the Australia-China relationship. In 2023, the United States will be mired in the Russia-Ukraine crisis and will have no time to engage in a more intense confrontation with China in the Asia-Pacific region, and the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship will be even closer, and the United States will be under enormous pressure from both China and Russia at the same time, and thus the United States will seek to

establish a more stable bilateral relationship with China. Australia took advantage of the sensitive period. On the one hand, as a US ally, a visit to China at this time would not affect Australia's strategy for the US–Australia alliance; on the other hand, Albanese's trip to China provided more opportunities for the ice to be thawed in the trilateral relations between China, the US, and Australia.

ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРАХ

КАТКОВА Евгения Юрьевна, кандидат исторических наук, старший преподаватель кафедры востоковедения и африканистики, кафедры иностранных языков РУДН им. Патриса Лумумбы, Москва, Россия

ЛЮ Цзяньци, магистрант кафедры теории и истории международных отношений РУДН им. Патриса Лумумбы, Москва, Россия

У Хайчао, магистрант кафедры теории и истории международных отношений РУДН им. Патриса Лумумбы, Москва, Россия

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Evgeniya Yu. KATKOVA, Senior Lecturer of the Department of Oriental and African Studies, Senior Lecturer of the Department of Foreign Languages of Patrice Lumumba RUDN University (Peoples Friendship University of Russia), Russia, Moscow

LIU Jianqi, Master's student of the Department of Theory and History of International Relations Lumumba RUDN University (Peoples Friendship University of Russia), Russia, Moscow

WU Haichao, Master's student of the Department of Theory and History of International Relations Lumumba RUDN University (Peoples Friendship University of Russia), Russia, Moscow

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