

Australian PM presses for closer military, police ties with Papua New Guinea

Patrick O'Connor
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Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard concluded a three-day trip to Papua New Guinea (PNG) on Saturday, after securing agreements for greater military and policing links between the two countries. The new arrangements are aimed at aligning PNG more closely with the US-led strategic confrontation of China.

The impoverished South Pacific country has been forging economic relations with Beijing. Former Prime Minister Michael Somare had advanced a “look north” foreign policy orientation, developing closer diplomatic and military relations with China, but he was then illegally removed from office in mid-2011. With the full support of Washington and Canberra, O’Neill subsequently defeated Somare’s challenge and consolidated power, following a protracted political crisis that split the state apparatus.

O’Neill and Gillard have now signed a “Joint Partnership Declaration,” emulating a “partnership” document agreed to between PNG and Australia in 1987. The Australian prime minister declared that the agreement “reflects the evolution of the bilateral relationship, to a new level of cooperation” and “affirms both countries’ commitment to deepening ties and to working together in the region to benefit from the opportunities presented by the Asian Century.”

This “cooperation” is aimed at bolstering Canberra’s domination over its former colonial possession, which it ruled until 1975. Gillard and O’Neill initialled a Defence Cooperation Arrangement, which outlined an annual formal meeting between the countries’ defence ministers, and stronger ties between their military commands. Canberra had previously expressed concern over China’s military relations with PNG, including the training of commanders in Beijing. Earlier this month, PNG was one of only two Pacific states to participate in the inaugural South Pacific Defence Ministers’

meeting, held in Tonga. Australian military personnel were actively involved, together with US observers. According to a Radio Australia report, “the growing influence of China” was to be “high on the agenda” at that meeting.

Canberra is extending the influence of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) in PNG, with O’Neill agreeing to a new phase of the so-called PNG-Australia Policing Partnership. This will involve at least 19 AFP agents being inserted into the PNG police force in “advisory” and “capacity building” roles. This will mark the largest deployment of Australian police to PNG since 2005, when more than 100 AFP agents were pulled out of the country after the PNG Supreme Court ruled that their immunity from PNG law was unconstitutional. Michael Somare, then prime minister, backed the court’s ruling, provoking Canberra’s anger. The AFP deployment had been the key component of Australia’s neo-colonial Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP) in PNG, modelled on the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

Across the South Pacific, Canberra deploys AFP agents, including members of the paramilitary International Deployment Group, to execute its diktats on the ground. The AFP has played a critical role in propping up RAMSI, including by arresting and framing up political opponents of the Australian intervention in Solomon Islands.

O’Neill’s invitation to a significant AFP force in PNG underscores his role as Canberra’s man. The PNG prime minister flagged a wider deployment. The current AFP operation will not involve “front line” roles within the PNG police force, and the Australian officers will not enjoy legal immunity. O’Neill told journalists that this could soon change. “The agreements do not reflect the ECP style of policing agreement to take place in the

country because we have got some legislative issues and constitutional issues that we in Papua New Guinea need to sort out,” he said.

O’Neill relied on his control over the police and military in his struggle for power with Somare. His authoritarian rule has been marked by violent crackdowns on opposition protests, and by the militarisation of parts of the country, above all the resource-rich Highlands Region. The PNG military has suppressed opposition from local residents and landowners to an Exxon-led \$19 billion liquid natural gas (LNG) project in the Southern Highlands—by far PNG’s largest ever investment project.

Last Wednesday, just before Gillard arrived in PNG, O’Neill again called out the military for domestic purposes, this time after a road in the Highlands disintegrated following heavy rains. The *Post Courier* reported that the military were sent in to “discourage lawlessness, disorder and disruption to highway restoration work by landowners demanding compensation.” O’Neill described the damaged road as an “important economic lifeline” that had to be defended.

Canberra has backed O’Neill’s use of the military and provided him with the necessary hardware, including attack helicopters. Gillard visited the LNG project on Friday, boasting of Australia’s involvement, including the provision of some initial investment finance, and the role of Oil Search, an Australian corporation, in the Exxon-led consortium.

Australian corporations have other significant investments in the rapidly expanding mineral and energy industry in PNG. There is mounting rivalry for access to these lucrative resources, with China and other Asian powers seeking new investments. China, together with Japan and South Korea, will purchase the exported LNG once the Exxon-project begins production next year. For Beijing, one key consideration is that PNG’s energy exports are not routed through the Straits of Malacca, a naval chokepoint that the US and Australia have identified as a potential means of shutting off trade between China and the Middle East and Africa.

While developing its economic relations with Beijing, including by accessing nearly \$3 billion in cheap loans for infrastructure projects, the O’Neill government has pledged to continue its long-standing

diplomatic allegiance to Australian imperialism. “There is no conflict whatsoever,” William Duma, minister for petroleum and energy, insisted in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*. “Aren’t we all looking to export to China?”

During Gillard’s visit, O’Neill also pledged to construct permanent detention facilities to house asylum seekers transported from Australia by her Labor government.

The PNG prime minister secured a promise from Gillard to review Australia’s stringent visa application rules for Papua New Guineans. The restrictions have provoked the ire of local residents, including business figures and others within the ruling elite, who must complete costly and intrusive application forms to enter Australia. At the official dinner for the two prime ministers, O’Neill denounced the regulations as “insulting.”

Gillard later indicated that she understood that this posturing was purely for domestic consumption, rejecting suggestions that O’Neill’s statements had embarrassed Canberra.



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