

Australian government planning to reopen strategic Papua New Guinea naval base

Mike Head

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The government of recently-installed Prime Minister Scott Morrison is working on plans with the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government to develop a joint naval base on PNG's Manus Island that would host Australian and US warships.

The return of the Australian and US navies to Manus Island would be a significant preparation for a US-led war against China. Because of its strategic location in the Pacific Ocean, several hundred kilometres north of PNG's main island, Manus is important for plans to cut China's access to key trade routes.

During World War II, Manus became a major US naval and air base, pivotal to the final stages of the war against Japan. Before the US invasion of the Philippines in late 1944, more than 800 ships were in the Manus Island harbour. Installations included wharves and floating docks, four airfields, living quarters for 150,000 troops, a 3,000-bed hospital, fuel depots, supply stores and repair workshops.

After World War II, Australia took possession of the deep-water port for as long as PNG remained an Australian colony, gradually running down the facility until handing it over when the territory's formal independence was granted in 1975. Since 2001, Australian governments have maintained a hold over Manus Island as a site for detaining hundreds of refugees barred from reaching Australia.

According to yesterday's *Australian*, ousted Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and PNG Prime Minister Peter O'Neill discussed the proposed transformation of PNG's Lombrum Naval Base at a July 11 meeting in Brisbane. After a subsequent "scoping mission" by Australian defence officials, O'Neill reportedly wrote to Turnbull to formally express his support for the project.

These proposals have been drawn up entirely behind the backs of the Australian and PNG working class. No estimates have been reported about the costs involved,

which would have to run into hundreds of millions of dollars, adding to the near-\$200 billion already allocated by the Australian government, with the Labor Party's backing, for expanded military spending over the next decade.

Morrison's Liberal-National Coalition government reportedly hopes to finalise arrangements for the base before this year's Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) summit, to be hosted by PNG from November 12–18.

That gathering will be preceded by a special meeting for Pacific island leaders in Port Moresby, the PNG capital, hosted by China's President Xi Jinping—a sign of Beijing's growing influence in the Pacific.

Increasingly, these developments are being publicly discussed in the context of war. The *Australian's* defence and national security editor Paul Maley described the establishment of a Manus base as "a coup in the escalating strategic competition with Beijing for influence in the Pacific." PNG was a "jewel in the crown" because it was "perfectly placed to give any navy a commanding view of the maritime approaches to East Asia."

Likewise, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) director Michael Shoebridge, a former Defence Department official, told the newspaper that a Manus base "would help give the US a wider operating and support footprint in the Pacific, and give Australian naval forces a location 2,000 kilometres away from Darwin and some 1,600 kilometres north of Cairns—the two closest Royal Australian Navy bases."

ASPI is an Australian government-funded think tank with close connections to the US military-intelligence apparatus. If the project were announced before the APEC summit, Shoebridge said, it would "send a very welcome message about the deeper intent behind Australia's commitment."

ASPI has pushed the Manus plan, presenting it as a test

for Morrison. On August 28, four days after Morrison replaced Turnbull, the *Australian* published a column by ASPI senior analyst Anthony Bergin urging the establishment of such a base as a means for Morrison to “show Australia’s partnership with PNG can grow in new ways under his watch.”

Already, Australia’s military presence in PNG has been secretly stepped up. On September 12, Morrison admitted that Australian special forces soldiers had been sent there, supposedly to help secure Port Moresby ahead of the APEC summit. No information has been provided on the contingent’s size. Special forces units have been on the frontline of Australia’s participation in every recent US-led war, including the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

In what amounts to a show of force, Australian navy warships also will be located off the PNG coast, purportedly to protect cruise ships used for temporary APEC accommodation. Australian Federal Police, previously assigned to PNG, will be on hand as well.

PNG is of vital economic and strategic importance to both Canberra and Washington in their drive to dominate the Asia-Pacific region and block the rise of China to potentially challenge US hegemony. With the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” followed by Trump’s continuing military build-up in the region, Australia has sought to align PNG more closely with the US-led confrontation of China.

While most of its population lives in poverty as a result of decades of imperialist exploitation, PNG is resource-rich. It is the site of lucrative transnational mining projects, including the Ok Tedi copper and gold mine, the Porgera and Lihir gold mines, oilfields in the highlands and the \$20 billion ExxonMobil liquefied natural gas (LNG) plant, with a second LNG plant planned.

China’s state-owned Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) has the \$2.6 billion Ramu nickel and cobalt mine in Madang, and Beijing has become a large investor and aid donor. In the lead up to the APEC summit, it has financed new highways and road resurfacing, and a Port Moresby convention centre. China Harbour Engineering recently developed Lae, PNG’s biggest port, via an Asian Development Bank tender.

Prime Minister O’Neill, who heads an authoritarian regime, was installed with Australia’s backing in 2011, but has sought to manoeuvre between the US and China. In June, O’Neill led a delegation of about 100, including 50 PNG-based Chinese businesspeople, to Beijing. After meeting Xi, he declared: “Papua New Guinea is committed to deepening its strategic partnership with

China.”

In Port Moresby, Xi will undertake a formal state visit. He is expected to make announcements about PNG and the Pacific, possibly including a trade agreement with PNG and an infrastructure project to directly link the capital to the mining areas of the highlands.

Under pressure from Washington to step up its efforts to counter China in the Pacific, the Australian government has taken aggressive steps recently. In July, Turnbull signed a deal with O’Neill and Solomon Islands Prime Minister Rick Houenipwela to fund a \$136 million internet cable between the three countries, preventing Chinese company Huawei from building the infrastructure.

Canberra also blocked Chinese involvement in the upgrade of Fiji’s Black Rock military camp. Turnbull conducted negotiations with Fijian President Frank Bainimarama to ensure Australia became the sole foreign donor in the redevelopment of the Nadi base, which will be a regional training hub for South Pacific defence forces.

These strategic conflicts are escalating amid the worsening tariff and economic war launched by the Trump administration against China, the logic of which is military war.

Last week, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who was deposed in 2010 after urging the US to make some accommodation to China’s rise, delivered a speech in California warning of the danger of another world war. It was an “open question” if and when “the unpredictable forces now being unleashed by this rapidly unfolding new economic war erupt into one form or other of military confrontation.”



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