

Australian media stokes fears over Papua New Guinea-China links

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The Australian media is working hand-in-hand with the government to demonise China's so-called "interference" in the country's political, economic and educational affairs. It is also focusing on China's involvement in the Pacific region, recently stoking fears over Beijing's presence in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Australia's former colonial possession.

The coverage underscores the interests of Australian imperialism in what it regards as its own "back yard," and is designed to further whip up anti-Chinese sentiment in preparation for military conflict. PNG is regarded as vital as a buffer between, and a gateway into, the Pacific Ocean. Also, Australia's huge mining and energy companies have investments in PNG worth \$A5.8 billion.

The *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) featured a front-page article on August 11 headed "Huawei data centre built to spy on PNG." It cited a 2019 Australian government report alleging that a centre in Port Moresby built by the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei and funded through a \$US53 million loan from China's Exim Bank, had intentionally exposed PNG government secrets.

The AFR article echoes moves led by the US to cripple Huawei's operations and eliminate it from the rollout of 5G mobile phone technology. Worldwide bans on Huawei's commercial activities, on the basis of unsubstantiated assertions the company spies on behalf of the Chinese government and its intelligence services, are part of Washington's aggressive moves to isolate Beijing and prepare for war.

Canberra has already fallen into line, including in the Pacific. Following the intervention of US officials in 2018, the Morrison Liberal government applied pressure to stop Huawei from building a new internet cable to PNG and the Solomon Islands, on "security"

grounds. The Solomons government had signed a contract with Huawei in 2017 to build the cable, but then agreed to renege on the agreement.

The report cited by the AFR was commissioned by the National Cyber Security Centre of PNG, which is funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and written by a cyber-security contractor, not named by the paper. The report could hardly be described as "independent."

The AFR claims the 64-page report was the first to allege Huawei's "complicity in Beijing's cyber espionage activities," but it is nothing of the sort. While the report claims a series of failings in the security footprint at the centre, it fails to offer any actual evidence of espionage.

The author alleges that outdated encryption software was deployed by Huawei, and firewall settings were "insufficient for a centre designed to store the entire data archive of the PNG government." Data flows could be easily intercepted, the report said, and remote access would not be detected by security settings. It alleges the algorithm used for encrypting communications was considered "openly broken" by cyber security experts two years before being installed.

The conclusion is drawn that there was a "deliberate effort" by Huawei to deploy lax cyber security in the centre's build. In a statement, Huawei flatly denied the accusation, saying the project complied with "appropriate industry standards and the requirements of the customer."

Despite the AFR's lurid headline, the paper was forced to note that the centre had quickly fallen into disrepair as insufficient money was set aside for maintenance and operations. Financial assistance was sought from the Australian government, prompting the report's commissioning, but which Canberra declined.

In other words, the AFR article, based on a dubious report that is more than a year old, proves nothing.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) published an equally loaded article on August 16, proclaiming that a school in Port Moresby, the Butuka Academy, had become “a diplomatic weapon for China.” It cited a former Australian high commissioner to PNG, Ian Kemish, who declared the school, built by the state-owned China Construction Steel Structure Corp, “betrayed China’s broader intentions in the region,” purportedly demonstrating Beijing’s “soft-power capacity.”

The SMH was perturbed by the school’s popularity, highlighted by comments from a former teacher who pointed out the “facilities were excellent and the school was in high demand.” The students’ parents, she added, “think that the Chinese government is helping a lot.” The school has extensive facilities focusing on science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

The SMH article pointed to concerns in Australian ruling circles over strengthening links between Beijing and PNG Prime Minister James Marape. He was installed last year after his predecessor Peter O’Neill resigned amid financial mismanagement and corruption allegations. O’Neill’s seizure of power in 2011, in violation of the constitution, was backed by Australia, which regarded him as a bulwark against the expansion of Beijing’s influence in the region.

On assuming office, Marape stirred fears in Canberra with a request that the Chinese government consider refinancing the country’s national debt of 26 billion kina (\$A11.3 billion). While this did not eventuate, Marape has insisted he wants to move the country away from an “aid-donor” dependency on Australia.

A series of Beijing-backed ventures, in addition to the school, are also alarming Canberra. The SMH says the “CCP [Chinese Communist Party] is ramping up its infrastructure investment,” including airport runway expansions, seafood exports, COVID-19 medical aid and a national courthouse, backed by multimillion-dollar capital injections. It also notes that PNG supports China’s new national security law in Hong Kong that criminalises dissent with sentences of up to life in prison.

PNG is on the frontline of great power competition with China, as far as both Canberra and Washington are concerned. It is a contest in which Australian

imperialism is determined to maintain its hegemony.

Australia uses its aid program to retain influence and actively works to ensure a pliant government in Port Moresby. It funnels some \$A600 million annually into PNG through various grants, most of which are tied to specific projects. Morrison committed \$A45 million on August 4 to fund technical and vocational training, while seeking to further negotiations on a bilateral “security” treaty and a proposed naval base on Manus Island. Australian military and police personnel are permanently on some form of exchange or assignment in the country.

The Australian ruling class never demonstrated the slightest concern for the PNG masses when it ruled over them, and has no concern for them today. Canberra has provided scant support to PNG as it currently battles a dangerous surge of over 300 new COVID-19 cases. While billions are plundered in profits, the majority of PNG’s nine million population—the working class and semi-subsistence rural villagers—live in extreme poverty and backwardness.



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