

# Australian PM visits Papua New Guinea to deepen anti-China campaign

Oscar Grenfell  
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Last Thursday and Friday, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese visited Papua New Guinea (PNG) for talks with the leadership of the country and to deliver an address to its national parliament. Albanese was the first foreign leader to ever speak before that assembly in its decades-long history.

The tour was replete with references to the supposed “Pacific family” and “Pacific mateship.” Cynical claims too were made about purported Australian concern for the grinding social crisis in PNG, where at least 40 percent of the population lives in poverty.

All of this was window dressing. In reality, as was openly noted in the Australian press, Albanese’s visit was part of a broader campaign by his Labor government to combat “Chinese influence” in the Pacific region and to line up its governments with the advanced US-led preparations for a war against China.

PNG is of particular importance in this strategically-critical region. It is far and away the most populous Pacific nation, with some nine million citizens. Most other Pacific states have a population in the low hundreds of thousands, or even less.

That gives PNG scope for the development of a more substantial military. It already has a culture of active military combat, having prosecuted a brutal war against Bougainville separatists that only concluded in the late 1990s.

Of far more significance are the country’s naval bases, some of which have been developed with US and Australian aid. Under conditions in which a war in the Pacific would centre on aerial and naval battle, PNG has the most developed naval facilities, as well as a substantial landmass that could be used as a staging ground for air deployments.

Albanese made the visit in the wake of top-level Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) in December. At those meetings, representatives of his Labor government and the Biden administration committed to a major expansion of an American military presence in Australia. They also devoted particular attention to the Pacific, stressing the need for the US and its allies to reassert their predominant

position in the region.

The outcome is that the Labor government, acting on behalf of the US, is pushing for far-reaching security deals with the Pacific governments. In December, shortly after the AUSMIN talks, Foreign Minister Penny Wong visited Vanuatu and struck such an agreement with its government. It contains sweeping provisions for the development of an Australian military presence on the island-nation, as well as for greater collaboration across a host of security areas.

Albanese’s visit was aimed at striking a similar deal with PNG.

The broader context is the hysteria that erupted within Australian and US ruling circles over a security pact between China and the Solomon Islands. When it was revealed last April, the Biden administration and the then Australian Liberal-National government both threatened military intervention if the deal resulted in the establishment of a Chinese military presence in the Solomons.

Then, in July, the US and the Labor government, installed after the May federal election, worked to scuttle a Chinese proposal for an overarching economic and security agreement with the majority of Pacific states.

In a stark expression of imperialist hypocrisy, the US and its allies, above all Australia, are now seeking to do what they accused China of doing, i.e., ringing the region with military pacts. In fact the Australian deal with Vanuatu has a far more direct military and security component than anything Beijing had proposed.

Throughout his visit, Albanese aggressively pushed for the finalisation of a defence treaty between Australia and PNG.

In his speech before the PNG parliament, Albanese absurdly spoke of a “bond between equals,” i.e., between Australia, the preeminent imperialist power in the region, and PNG, among the most impoverished countries in the world. PNG was an Australian colony until 1975. In that time, Australia dominated the country and looted its raw materials. Since independence, Australia has done nothing to improve the lot of the population.

Albanese spoke of “two Pacific Ocean states determined to

preserve peace and security in our region, recognising the value and the importance of a family-first approach, and writing that principle of regionalism and that sense of deep trust into our new Bilateral Security Treaty. Our partnership is vital to regional security...”

In a joint press conference with PNG Prime Minister James Marape after a leaders’ meeting, Albanese stated: “One of the things that we’re talking about with the security arrangement is a comprehensive arrangement rather than a narrow one.”

Albanese added: “So, this is a very broad agreement recognising that our security interests are intertwined. By virtue of our geography, decisions taken in one country have an impact in the other. And that’s why our security interests, in my view, are indivisible. Indivisible.” In other words, while accusing China of bullying Pacific states, Australia, acting on behalf of the US, is insisting that the Pacific countries have no option but to sign binding security pacts.

Albanese and Marape issued a joint statement, committing them to finalising such a pact by April 30.

A sticking point may be the status of Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island, strategically located off PNG’s north coast. In the lead-up to Albanese’s trip, the *Australian* published an article based on an interview with PNG Foreign Minister Justin Tkatchenko. It reported: “A defence treaty between the countries is also likely to be progressed, but PNG’s Lombrum Naval Base will remain predominantly for the country’s own use, despite visions for a ‘joint facility’ with Australia and the US.”

The *Australian* reported last August that the Labor government was aggressively lobbying for greater access to the base. “Australia is eyeing a greater role for the joint naval base on Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island under a strengthened defence partnership between the countries amid concerns over China’s plans to expand its strategic footprint in the region,” it stated.

“A senior government source said the Lombrum base—a joint PNG-Australia-US facility—was a key strategic asset offering important ‘forward projection’ possibilities for the ADF [Australian Defence Force].” The source also indicated that “Australia needed to ‘use all the elements of our statecraft’ to ensure the base was expanded.”

In plain English, the Labor government would hector, bully and harass PNG’s weak and unstable government to ensure that Australia and the US could use the facility for “forward projection,” defence jargon meaning a base for offensive military operations throughout the region.

Australia and the US have been pushing for the base to station their naval vessels since at least 2018. Manus Island has also housed an Australian operated detention facility, where refugees seeking asylum in Australia were detained in

concentration camp-like conditions.

The PNG ruling elite has undoubtedly hesitated to accede to all of the demands because it would embroil the country in full-blown confrontation with China.

The Australian demands underscore the fraudulent character of warnings about China establishing a military foothold in the region. Such assertions are a classic example of projection, with the US and Australia accusing China of doing precisely what they are undertaking themselves.

In the lead-up to Albanese’s visit, the Australian press sought to whip-up these allegations, ludicrously claiming that Chinese funding for a PNG hospital may be the beachhead for a Chinese military presence.

For his part, Albanese outlined no measures to address the appalling social crisis afflicting the PNG population. During his visit media reports revealed that PNG hospitals were overflowing with corpses, something that has happened repeatedly over recent years. In addition to poverty and a grossly-inadequate healthcare system, the country has suffered from unchecked outbreaks of the coronavirus.

A January 13 article in the *Post Courier* reported: “Another 90 bodies are listed for a third mass burial by the Port Moresby General Hospital to further ease the overcrowded situation at the hospital’s morgue...The bodies started accumulating between August 1 and December 15 2021.”

The *Post Courier* continued: “This burial will be the third mass paupers’ burial since December last year involving hundreds of unclaimed bodies and body parts. The most recent burial was two weeks ago when 127 bodies, including 49 infants were buried en-masse in a single unmarked grave.”

While Australia does nothing about this grievous social crisis and denounces China for funding a hospital, Albanese did promise one area of aid. His Labor government would boost funding and training to PNG’s notoriously brutal and corrupt police force. In other words, while trying to place the Pacific country on the frontlines of war with China, the Labor government will also assist in the violent repression of social opposition from workers, young people and the poor.



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