

Papua New Guinea students protest military pact with US

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Protests by students in Papua New Guinea (PNG) continued last week following the May 22 signing of a bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement with the US directed against China. It will give the American military sweeping “boots on the ground” access to the strategically significant South Pacific country.

The *PNG Post Courier* reported that the following day that hundreds of students from the Mt Hagen Technical College (HATECO) in Western Highlands Province staged a protest march through the crowded town centre, despite the presence of security personnel.

Marches were held the previous day by students from HATECO, the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG), and the University of Technology and University of Goroka—all demanding that Prime Minister James Marape not sign the agreement until citizens were “made fully aware of what is entailed in the document.”

The pact was the centrepiece of a summit of Pacific Island leaders in Port Moresby, organised by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, that was used by Washington for its own purposes. The document was signed by Marape and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken after US President Biden, who was to have attended, cancelled.

The meetings were intended to counter ongoing concern across the Pacific over what Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown, chair of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) calls “adversarial competition.” Opposition has emerged to the AUKUS agreement between Australia, the UK and US signed in 2021, which provides for Australia’s establishment of a nuclear-propelled submarine fleet.

The full text of the PNG-US Agreement has not yet been released, but it gives American forces unrestricted access to PNG’s territorial land, waters and airspace in

exchange for \$US45 million worth of development programs.

While issuing assurances that the country’s “independence” will not be compromised, Marape declared: “[A]s we go forward over the next 15 years, we will see US soldiers in our country. We will see US contractors in our country.” The US military presence is forecast to become the biggest since World War II.

The Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island is central to any future operations against China. It housed 30,000 US military personnel in 1944 and remains a vital strategic asset, recently upgraded and jointly controlled by PNG, Australia and the US.

PNG itself suffered greatly during World War II, when it was the scene of intense jungle warfare at the height of Japanese imperialism’s drive south in its Pacific war against US imperialism and its allies.

The student protests against the militarisation of PNG point to emerging popular opposition throughout the Pacific region to the accelerating US-led war drive against China.

Protest leaders appear to have focused on the anti-democratic way in which the agreement had been pushed through and the implications for PNG national interests, rather than on the growing dangers of a new Pacific war.

A UPNG protest organiser Gordon Walimbu told the *Post Courier* that students were concerned about the “sovereignty of the nation,” and were petitioning the government to table the document in parliament “for people’s approval before signing it.” He did not oppose a military agreement with the US as such but declared it must be “in favour of the PNG and its people.”

Walimbu’s comments are in line with sections of the PNG ruling class that fear the pact with the US will cut across and endanger their interests. Opposition leader

and former prime minister Peter O'Neill told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that with increasing competition between the US and China, now was "not the time" to be strengthening military ties with America.

"The talk that is going on is reaching dangerous levels and PNG is now caught in between," O'Neill said. He was supported by Jerry Singirok, former commander of the PNG Defence Force, who expressed concerns about the presence of US and Australian troops at Manus Island.

O'Neill has no principled opposition to imperialist war and has a long record of close ties with Australia, PNG's former colonial master and the major US ally in the Pacific. He fears that PNG's significant trade and investment ties with China will be disrupted by its integration into US war plans.

O'Neill seized power in 2011 backed by Canberra which regarded him as a bulwark against Beijing. As prime minister, he presided over the vast social gulf that separates the venal ruling elite from the poverty-stricken working class and rural masses. He used authoritarian measures to suppress discontent, including the 2016 shooting of student protesters demanding his resignation.

In 2018, O'Neill undertook a major shift towards China, visiting Beijing and signing up to the "Belt and Road" infrastructure initiative, making PNG the first Pacific country to do so. Before losing office in 2019 over corruption allegations, he unsuccessfully sought China's financial support amid a gathering domestic economic and social crisis. Following his departure, Canberra provided an emergency loan of \$A440 million that helped finance PNG's 2020 budget.

Washington has long considered the strategically significant and resource rich PNG to be on the "front line" of its confrontation with China. During 2011, President Obama announced the US "Pivot to Asia," and in 2012 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Port Moresby. She later claimed China was seeking to "elbow" ExxonMobil out of a \$US16.5 billion gas project and emphasised the "realpolitik" of US interests in PNG, accusing China of moving to "come in behind us, come in under us."

More than a decade later, the danger of a US conflict with China is escalating. As it seeks to provoke war with China over Taiwan, the US and its allies are

engaged in a full-court press to overcome any resistance among Pacific Island countries and integrate them into its war planning.

This week, US ally South Korea hosted a summit of Pacific Island leaders in Seoul, as part of its foreign policy goal of becoming a "global pivotal state." All 18 members of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) were invited. According to South Korea's foreign ministry the country's first such summit reflected the need for "a drastic upgrade in relations" with the Pacific.

After the signing of the PNG-US Agreement, President Biden formally invited Pacific leaders to Washington for face-to-face talks later this year, building on an initial meeting there last September. Following an address by Vice President Kamala Harris at last year's Pacific Islands Forum, the US will be involved at a high level in the upcoming gathering in the Cook Islands in November.

Students and young people across the Pacific region cannot oppose the intrigues and far-advanced war preparations by the US against China by appealing to their own governments or any faction of the ruling class as they seek to manoeuvre between the major powers.

What is required is the building of a mass anti-war movement of workers, the rural poor and youth, based on a socialist perspective aimed at abolishing the capitalist system, which is the source of war. This is an international struggle, requiring the unity of the working class across the Pacific, Australia, New Zealand and Asia. We urge young people, students and workers in Papua New Guinea and the Pacific to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* to discuss the way forward in this fight.



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