

Australia signs anti-China security agreement with Papua New Guinea

John Braddock
10 December 2023

Australia will train Papua New Guinea (PNG) police as part of a wide-ranging security agreement that commits the two countries to “prioritise consultations with each other” about the Pacific nation’s “security needs.”

The pact was signed in Canberra on December 7 by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his PNG counterpart James Marape. Marape falsely claimed the “historic” deal did not mean his country was choosing between China and the West amid intensifying rivalry for influence across the Pacific.

In reality, the deal effectively commits PNG, an Australian colony until its formal independence in 1975, to the escalating US-led confrontation with China. It is, moreover, a model for Canberra’s use in its role as US imperialism’s chief attack dog across the wider South Pacific.

Australia and neighbouring New Zealand, the regional imperialist powers, have dominated the Pacific for over a century and are primarily responsible for the legacy of impoverishment, backwardness and isolation that benights the region. They are seeking to tighten their grip while helping ramp up the US war drive with China, which Washington has designated the chief threat to US global hegemony.

At the signing ceremony, Albanese pitched the involvement of PNG’s population in supporting the fighting by Australian troops against Japan in World War II, claiming the countries’ defence relationship was forged through shared “sacrifice.” “For our interests going forward, we have no closer friends than Papua New Guinea,” Albanese declared.

Marape noted that PNG’s judiciary, public service and borders were established by Australia before his country’s independence. He told reporters the agreement showed they were “brother and sister nations,” but added PNG would not “pick sides” as it had a foreign policy of “friends to all.”

Albanese nevertheless emphasised that the new agreement was “legally binding.” It would, he said, make it “easier for Australia and Papua New Guinea to support each other’s security and the region’s stability.” “We worked it through in a way that we both got exactly what we wanted from this process,” Albanese maintained.

Under the agreement, Australia and PNG will strengthen cooperation in a range of areas including defence, police, law and justice, cybersecurity, climate and violence against women and children. They will jointly consider how to respond “in the event of a security-related development that threatens the sovereignty, peace or stability of either Party, or the Pacific region.” PNG already has a record of active military combat, having prosecuted a brutal war against Bougainville separatists that concluded in the late 1990s.

The agreement includes a guarantee that the status of Australian and PNG forces in each other’s country will be “no less favourable than would be afforded to personnel from other countries.” It does not prevent PNG from cooperating with other countries on security assistance, but there is a provision that the two shall coordinate on “the involvement and contribution of third parties”—effectively giving Canberra a veto over PNG’s foreign policy engagements.

The deal cements Australia’s existing role in PNG’s policing, judiciary and defence. Australia will spend \$200 million directly “in support of Papua New Guinea’s national security priorities.” Canberra will help establish a Port Moresby-based police training centre, which will also offer places to train police from other Pacific countries.

The agreement follows last month’s signing of a similar neo-colonial pact with Tuvalu, which gives Canberra the right to vet any military, police, telecommunications and infrastructure agreements the tiny island nation might make with other countries, in particular China. Under the

guise of protecting Tuvalu's 11,200 people from military aggression and climate change, Albanese hailed the agreement as "a guarantee that upon a request from Tuvalu for any military assistance based upon security issues, Australia will be there."

PNG, strategically situated immediately north of Australia, is the South Pacific's largest and most populous state and has an increasingly prominent role in the US-led warmongering against China. The US-PNG Defense Cooperation Agreement signed in May gives Washington "uninhibited access" to numerous PNG military and civilian locations, including its naval base on Manus Island. The US Coast Guard is already running joint operations with PNG personnel in local waters. US military presence in the country is forecast to become the biggest since World War II over the next 15 years.

Preparations for war go hand-in-hand with repressive measures against the restive working class and rural masses. PNG Deputy Prime Minister John Rosso told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that the agreement aims to build the capability of both the PNG military and constabulary. Endemic tribal violence in the highlands is being used as the pretext to prepare for a planned increase in overall police numbers from 6,000 to 26,000.

Opposition within PNG has emerged to the security pacts. The US-PNG Agreement was met with protests by hundreds of university students in Port Moresby in May. Opposition parties have repeatedly accused Marape of drawing PNG into broader geopolitical turmoil. Negotiations with Canberra dragged on for months amid claims within the PNG ruling elite that initial wording in the Australian pact encroached on PNG's "sovereign rights."

Australia still exerts economic, military and strategic sway over PNG, one of the world's most impoverished and oppressed countries. While resource rich, the country's nine million inhabitants suffer from severe health crises, lack of formal education, economic hardship and stark social inequality. It is ruled over by a corrupt and venal political establishment that is widely regarded as illegitimate following repeated fraudulent elections.

The conclusion of security agreements with the US and Australia follows an extended period of diplomatic and economic bullying. In January, Albanese promoted Canberra's agreement in a visit to Port Moresby in the wake of top-level Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN).

At these talks, Australia's Labor government and the Biden administration committed to a major expansion of

an American military presence in Australia and devoted particular attention to the Pacific, stressing the need for the US and its allies to reassert their predominant position in the region.

A mid-year surge in diplomatic activity saw a series of unprecedented visits by top US personnel, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited PNG in July to firm up the US-PNG defence pact. President Joe Biden then hosted a summit in September, his second, with leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum at the White House as part of the stepped up "engagement" with the region.

The militarist agenda continues apace. A two-day South Pacific Defence Ministers' meeting last week in the French colony of New Caledonia resolved to create a Pacific Military Academy in Nouméa to train military officers from Pacific Island states.

The meeting was hosted by French Defence Minister Sébastien Lecornu as part of France's bid to advance its own imperialist interests in the region. It involved ministers from France, Australia, New Zealand, Chile, PNG, Fiji and Tonga, along with observers from the US, Japan and the United Kingdom.

The new project provides for French trainers to be deployed in Pacific states with a view to local personnel accessing France's top military academies. Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles also revealed that a "Pacific Response Group" will be established—a regional unit able to provide "humanitarian and security assistance" on request.

Coinciding with the Defence Ministers' meeting, 1,500 protesters marched in downtown Nouméa last Tuesday to denounce the "remilitarisation" of New Caledonia. "In the Pacific region, we are at peace. Let's stop manufacturing wars... we are not at war with anyone in the Pacific or Asia," protest coordinator Christian Tein told local TV Calédonia.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact