

Alarm in Canberra over Papua New Guinea-China negotiations on policing co-operation

John Braddock
1 February 2024

Papua New Guinea's (PNG) foreign minister, Justin Tkatchenko, has reaffirmed his government's close security ties with Australia following reports that the South West Pacific's largest and most strategically located island state was considering a policing and security cooperation agreement with China.

Tkatchenko said in a statement on Tuesday that PNG will maintain its relationship with Australia, "our closest neighbour and a traditional security partner," and continue the two countries' bilateral security agreement "now and into the future."

A day earlier Tkatchenko told Reuters that Beijing offered policing and security assistance in September last year. Discussions continued, he said, and the offer was being considered, including whether it would impinge on existing Australian and US security pacts. He emphasised: "They have offered it to us, but we have not accepted it at this point in time."

Tkatchenko's announcement, however, prompted immediate alarm in Australia, PNG's former colonial ruler. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported that Canberra was concerned Beijing was "once again targeting Pacific Island nations' police and security sectors to spread its influence."

Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese insisted that Australia remained PNG's "closest friend." "We are the security partner of choice for Papua New Guinea, as we are for most of the countries in the Pacific," Albanese said. He noted that the two nations signed a security agreement in December, which includes \$A200 million in funding to boost PNG's policing and national security services.

Australian governments regularly wheel out fraudulent claims of "friendship" and the "Pacific family" to disguise their own neo-colonial intentions across the region. Far from being the "partner of

choice," Australia is increasingly viewed with resentment as it bullies Pacific governments over aid and investments, refuses to take the necessary steps to address existential threats posed by climate change, and seeks to militarise the region in preparation for war.

Beijing's policing offer was reinforced after riots on January 10, driven by simmering social discontent and escalating living costs, decimated the capital Port Moresby and other centres, leaving 22 people dead. The Chinese Foreign Ministry urged PNG to take "swift and effective measures" to protect its citizens after businesses owned by Chinese expatriates were looted and some owners injured. An estimated 20,000 Chinese citizens live in the country.

Australia, the regional imperialist power with a long record of meddling directly in its impoverished neighbour's affairs, also indicated it was standing ready to send police and other support under the auspices of the security pact.

Tkatchenko's initial statement had declared that PNG and China were in the "early stages of negotiation" over a potential deal. The comments were a departure from PNG's usual stance that it wants only expanded economic ties with China. Tkatchenko said: "We deal with China at this stage only at [the] economic and trade level. They are one of our biggest trading partners, but they have offered to assist our policing and security on the internal security side."

China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin described PNG as a "good friend and partner" but did not give further details about any proposed security deal. "China is willing to continue to work with Papua New Guinea to continue to promote cooperation in relevant fields, deepen and promote common development," he said.

PNG's former prime minister and prominent

opposition figure, Peter O'Neill, said he was “deeply concerned” the minister was “actively discussing our country’s internal, domestic police and security arrangements with China.” O'Neill added that before and after independence “PNG has rightfully stuck to Australia when it comes to providing security for our country and the Pacific region.”

In the context of US-led preparations for war with China, any attempt by Beijing to gain even a toehold in PNG is a major cause of concern not just in Australia but Washington. With the assistance of Australia and New Zealand, US imperialism is intent on retaining the domination over the Pacific that it established after defeating Japan in World War II. No Chinese presence, no matter how limited, can be tolerated that would in any way challenge Washington’s grip over the region.

Australia’s opposition parties have ramped up pressure on Albanese, saying Australia’s strategic position in the Pacific nation must not be undermined. Shadow minister for foreign affairs, Simon Birmingham, pointed to Labor’s criticisms of the then conservative government after the Solomon Islands and China signed a security pact just before the 2022 federal election, which Labor’s Foreign Minister Penny Wong described at the time as “the worst failure of Australian foreign policy in the Pacific since the end of World War Two.”

Following riots and looting of Chinese businesses in the Solomon Islands in 2021, threats of military intervention were made by the US and Australia after the government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare signed the security agreement with China. The deal allows Chinese police to train local police officers to protect their investments while also giving Chinese naval ships access to the country’s extensive maritime zone.

US Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell visited the Solomons’ capital Honiara and publicly declared that Washington would have “significant concerns” and “respond accordingly,” if China were permitted to have any military presence in the country. Campbell’s threat was echoed by Australia’s then Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who said a Chinese base in Solomon Islands would be a “red line”—that is, a trigger for military intervention.

Underscoring the crisis confronting US and Australian imperialism, in July last year Sogavare

concluded a week-long diplomatic visit to China by signing a “strategic partnership” with Chinese President Xi Jinping. According to the *South China Morning Post*, the agreement authorises China to maintain its police presence in the Solomon Islands for at least another three years.

With tensions escalating over China’s growing presence in the Pacific, last month PNG’s neighbor Nauru cut its diplomatic ties with Taiwan to establish relations with China. Nauru’s President David Adeang said it was in the best interests of the country after Beijing offered greater economic investment in the small island nation.

The shift left just three Pacific island states—Tuvalu and two US semi-colonies, Palau and the Marshall Islands—maintaining formal relations with Taiwan. Tuvalu’s position is now causing concern after an election on January 27, closely watched by Taiwan, China, Australia and the US, saw the tiny country’s pro-Taiwan leader, Kausea Natano, lose his seat. Prominent leadership contender, Enele Sopoaga, has pledged support for Taiwan but wants a controversial security deal with Australia scrapped.

PNG’s Prime Minister James Marape meanwhile is visiting Canberra next week, where he will make the first ever address by the country’s leader to Australia’s parliament, which will be closely watched. He will undoubtedly come under enormous pressure to reject any policing deal with China.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact