

Australian PM Albanese pushes anti-China campaign in Papua New Guinea

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Anthony Albanese spent several days in Papua New Guinea (PNG) last week, in what has been billed by his Labor government as the longest trip to the Pacific nation by an Australian prime minister. In addition to a series of engagements, Albanese spent the best part of two days walking the Kokoda trail with PNG Prime Minister James Marape.

That unusual activity, and the substantial investment of Albanese's time, points to the strategic significance that Australia, acting as a partner of American imperialism in the region, has assigned to PNG. The length of the visit was all the more striking, given that Labor faces a deepening domestic political crisis in the lead-up to a federal election sometime over the next year, and is involved in US-led military operations around the globe including in the Middle East and Ukraine.

Albanese's visit was inevitably couched with pablum about the "Pacific family" and regional "friendship." Those comments are always jarring when applied to PNG, given that Australia maintained a more than half-century colonial domination over the island nation that only ended in 1975.

The phony rhetoric was only a veneer for the real content of Albanese's trip: a further push to align PNG with the US-led confrontation with China, for which Australia is a central diplomatic, political and military attack dog. Undermining any Chinese influence in the Pacific and lining its states up behind Washington has been one of the central focusses of the Labor government since it came to office. That included a previous trip in January 2023 to PNG by Albanese, where he was the first Australian prime minister to address its national parliament.

This year's visit was directly framed by mounting geopolitical competition.

Albanese arrived in Port Moresby, the capital of PNG, on April 22 a little over 24 hours after Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi left it. Wang and Marape signed two agreements providing for expanded trade and information technology sharing between China and PNG.

In his primary address, Wang denounced AUKUS, the

military pact between Australia, Britain and the US against China. It had "instigated division... not in line with the urgent needs of Pacific Island countries." Wang declared that the Pacific was not the "backyard of any major country," a reference to how the region is condescendingly described by Australian political leaders. He stated that greater Chinese trade and investment did not come with "strings attached."

Asked about the coincidence between the visits of Wang and Albanese, Marape diplomatically stated: "They didn't plan to be back-to-back... but PNG is blessed." While the "Australia-PNG partnership" was "second to none," Marape also said that China was a "crucial partner." Of the meetings with Wang, he said: "Trade supersedes aid and grants, we engaged in conversation to build a stronger economy in our country."

The comments point to a balancing act some Pacific leaders have attempted, between growing economic ties with Beijing and their historic alignment with and subordination to US and Australian imperialism. The wiggle room, however, is narrowing ever more rapidly as the US and its allies intensify a full-court press against Beijing, aimed at preparing for war with China.

That was the subtext of Albanese's visit. The whole trip was framed around Anzac Day, the commemoration of the World War I landing of Australian and New Zealand troops as part of the failed British invasion of Turkey. Beyond those nominal origins, Anzac Day is the premier celebration of Australian militarism, past and present.

Albanese's first engagement was an "Anzac Day commemoration dinner," hosted by Marape on April 22.

Albanese sought to tout Australian investment in PNG, presenting the relationship as one based on mutually-beneficial trade and economic collaboration. But even the civilian areas he pointed to had a clear military dimension to them, including Australia's role in the upgrading of six ports and in the expansion of road networks.

The bulk of his remarks, however, were directly connected to military questions. Albanese hailed Australia's role in the upgrade of Lombrum Naval base on Manus Island, as well

as “the trusted cooperation between our Defence Forces [that] has also allowed us to quickly respond to crises.”

Australian and US investment in Lombrum is hardly a benign act of charity. For years, hawkish think tanks in both countries have earmarked it as a key site for US and allied warships in the region.

More generally, PNG is viewed as among the most strategically-significant Pacific countries. Its population of around ten million is far and away the largest among the Pacific states, many of which have only several hundred thousand citizens or fewer. PNG has a large military, with combat experience, including in the brutal Australian-backed war against separatists on the PNG island of Bougainville. Its geographical expanse, including mountainous regions and ports, earmarks it as a potential military site for the broader region.

Some of those features contributed to PNG emerging as a substantial field of operations in the World War II battle for domination of the Pacific, which saw the US emerge as the world’s preeminent imperialist power.

In his remarks, Albanese invoked this history. “The legacy of those who fought for Papua New Guinea and Australia eight decades ago surrounds us, and warms us in its embrace. Our free societies. Our democracies. The very fact that we can gather here at peace and in friendship.” Of course PNG forces fought in that conflict as colonial subjects of Australia and would remain so for 30 years after its conclusion.

That message nevertheless was repeated multiple times throughout Albanese’s several-day visit. The Kokoda Track, part of which he walked with Marape, was the location of major battles between Australian and Japanese troops during World War II.

At a gathering, as he and Marape set out, Albanese proclaimed: “Our people fought together in World War Two on the Kokoda Track and defended Australia and defended Papua New Guinea... The Prime Minister, my dear friend, James Marape and I will walk side by side, step by step, together. It symbolises the fact that Australia and Papua New Guinea’s future is together.”

The message was none too subtle. As in World War II, Australia and PNG would be aligned in any future conflict in the Indo-Pacific, as the US openly prepares war with China. Albanese’s visit concluded with a dawn service at Isurava, in PNG, where he again hailed the WWII battles.

The invocations of WWII strike a rather discordant note, which Albanese, along with his courtiers in the Australian media, did not attempt to address. That war was fought by the US and its allies against Japanese imperialism for dominance over the Pacific. The atrocities committed by Japanese colonialism, in PNG, against China and more

broadly, were previously a staple of Australian military history and discussion.

Now, however, the US and its allies, including Australia are constantly deepening their ties with Japan, as it revives its military as part of the confrontation with China. That has included unprecedented agreements between Canberra and Tokyo, for reciprocal basing access, and a far-reaching military deal signed between Japan and the US in Washington earlier this month.

The invocations of history, while hinting at the major war that is being prepared, are thus of a particularly deceitful and hypocritical character.

It was notable that despite the length of Albanese’s visit and the resources invested, virtually nothing new was announced, including no new defence or economic agreements with PNG. That points to why Australia is so preoccupied with PNG, with evident concerns that the Marape government is not sufficiently committed to the anti-China drive.

PNG will continue to be a focus, not just for Australia, but for the US. In 2022 the US designated PNG a country for “priority engagement.” In 2023, it dispatched Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin to visit the Pacific nation.

Behind all the talk of “friendship,” the real agenda was bluntly spelt out in an article by the US-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute think tank last August.

It stated that “At the onset of a conflict or crisis, PNG could itself serve as a location for the US military to disperse combat assets from Guam and bases in the first island chain. In the event of a protracted maritime conflict, the US and Australia are both likely to regard PNG as a useful ‘in-theatre’ location from which to conduct combat replenishment, basic repairs and maintenance for ships and submarines, and possibly aircraft if the infrastructure is developed to support it.”



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