

# Australian PM fails to finalise neo-colonial defence treaty with Papua New Guinea

Oscar Grenfell  
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A push by the Australian Labor government to strengthen its neo-colonial dominance in the South West Pacific received a setback this week, when the government of Papua New Guinea (PNG) failed to endorse a wide-ranging defence treaty.

Labor, acting in concert with Washington, is seeking to integrate the Pacific states into the aggressive US-led preparations for war with China. At the same time, it is attempting to shore up its control over a geopolitically vital and resource-rich region that has always been central to the strategy of Australian imperialism.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese travelled to PNG at the beginning of the week, to finalise the treaty. As late as yesterday morning, sections of the Australian press were reporting that the treaty would be signed later in the day and were crowing that it would help to “China-proof” PNG and the broader Pacific.

But, as it transpired, PNG Prime Minister James Marape was only prepared to sign a “communique” with Albanese, which, while it commits to the signing of the treaty in the future, provides no timeline. Albanese has nevertheless insisted that the treaty will be ratified sometime “in the coming weeks.”

A meeting of the PNG cabinet, which had been set to give Marape the go-ahead on Monday evening did not make a quorum. The official explanation was that a number of government MPs had returned to their local areas to take part in events marking the 50th anniversary of PNG’s independence.

It seems clear, however, that the low turnout was bound up with widespread apprehension in layers of the PNG political establishment and the wider population over the implications of the deal. The Australian press, while lauding the treaty, has acknowledged substantial concerns in PNG that it will effectively annul the country’s sovereignty.

The timing makes that all the more striking. The

independence celebrations were marking five decades since Australia formally relinquished colonial control over PNG as an “external territory” of the country.

Australia formally took control of the British colony of Papua in 1906, shortly after the establishment of the Australian federation in 1901. After it seized the German colony of New Guinea at the outset of World War I, Australian imperialism looted the resources of PNG, particularly its minerals, repressed opposition and left a legacy of economic and social backwardness. Since 1975, Australia has repeatedly intervened in PNG to defend its economic and strategic interests.

The details of the defence treaty, as outlined by the communique, make clear that the Labor government was attempting to “celebrate” 50 years of PNG’s independence by effectively abolishing it and returning the largest Pacific Island country to the status of a neo-colony.

The “Papua New Guinea-Australia Mutual Defence Treaty” would take relations between the two countries to the level of a formal alliance.

The first clause, seemingly based on the ANZUS alliance between Australia, New Zealand and the US would “recognises that an armed attack on Australia or Papua New Guinea would be a danger to the peace and security of both countries.”

While the clause is open to interpretation, given the relative weight of Australia, as an imperialist power, and PNG as an oppressed former colony, it is clear that Canberra intends to give the clause the most far-reaching interpretation as an iron-clad commitment to joint action.

The second clause in the communique calls for a plan to directly recruit PNG citizens into the Australian military.

The third calls for “strengthening and expanding defence cooperation through enhanced capability, interoperability and integration.” In practice, what this means is extensive Australian access to PNG’s military

facilities.

The fourth states that the parties would be committed to “ensuring any activities, agreements or arrangements with third parties would not compromise the ability of either of the Parties to implement the Treaty.”

That is clearly directed against PNG entering into any agreements with China, and at providing Australia with a de facto veto over PNG’s foreign policy. The provision could also be used to block all deals with Beijing, including economic agreements, on the grounds of Australian national security.

Domestically, the Labor government has already invoked sweeping national-security laws to end the involvement of Chinese companies in non-military activities, including terminating a lease for the Port of Darwin.

PNG has always been a central focus of Australian imperialism, because it is far and away the largest of the Pacific states, by landmass, population and resources. Its military facilities and strategic position could play a major role in any war in the Indo-Pacific.

The country has also been a focus of the US-led military build-up for war against China. As the Obama administration was preparing its “pivot to Asia,” then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited PNG in 2010, signalling its importance to the war drive.

In 2023, after years of diplomatic campaigning by Washington, Marape signed a far-reaching defence pact with the US, giving American forces “uninhibited access” to PNG’s military and related civilian facilities. The US and Australia are involved in an expansion of the Lombrum Naval Base on Manus island, which was first established as a facility for the US military during World War II.

While Marape acceded to the US treaty in 2023, his government, like many throughout the Pacific, has continued to attempt to balance between Washington and Beijing. China is now PNG’s second-largest trading partner and has provided substantial investments in infrastructure, mining and a major development in the capital Port Moresby.

The Labor government’s aim in PNG and the region more broadly is to end that balancing act. In 2022, while in opposition, Labor joined Washington in responding hysterically to a security agreement signed between the Solomon Islands and China. Labor pledged that in office it would work to scuttle such deals and to fully align Pacific Island states with Washington’s build-up against Beijing.

Last year, Labor pushed through agreements with Nauru and Tuvalu, which effectively ceded control of their foreign and security policies to Canberra by granting it a veto. Nauru is one of the smallest countries in the world, and much of its territory has been decimated by the impact of phosphate mining. Tuvalu is among the Pacific states most immediately imperilled by rising sea levels. The security deal is based on allowing its population of 9,000 to eventually relocate to Australia, but only at a snail’s pace of 280 approvals a year.

In seeking to impose similar agreements on larger states, Canberra has faced pushback. The week before Albanese was rebuffed in PNG, Vanuatu similarly refused to finalise a security pact with its Prime Minister Jotham Napat. Opponents openly stated that some of its provisions appeared aimed at locking out China, including Chinese investments in infrastructure and economic development.

The two rejections point to the sham of Labor’s claims that its actions in the region are motivated by concern for the “Pacific family” and are based on “cooperation” and “respect.”

The reality is that Labor is functioning as an aggressive attack dog for American imperialism, seeking to hector, bully and coerce the impoverished Pacific states into committing to a catastrophic war with China.

The attempt to ram the Vanuatu and PNG agreements through appears to have been timed to precede Albanese’s visit to the US later this month. Albanese is desperately seeking a face-to-face meeting with US President Donald Trump, which has yet to occur in the wake of Labor’s reelection in the May federal election.

Albanese’s failure to secure a meeting has coincided with demands from the Trump administration that Australia dramatically increase its military spending, which is already at record levels, and explicitly commit its military assets to war with China in advance of such a conflict.



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