

Australia signs neo-colonial military treaty with PNG directed against China

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At a ceremony in Canberra yesterday, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his counterpart from Papua New Guinea (PNG) James Marape signed a formal defence treaty between the two countries.

Albanese has hailed the agreement as the first new formal treaty arrangement entered into by Australia in 70 years, comparing it to the existing ANZUS arrangements with the US and New Zealand.

The comparisons are ludicrous, as are Albanese's constant references to "our Pacific family." Those other treaties are between imperialist powers. In the case of PNG, it is a question of the former colonial power, Australia, entering into a neo-colonial arrangement with a country which, by some metrics, is among the most impoverished in the world.

The treaty, moreover, is not about mutual protection and aid as it has been presented. Instead, its signing is the culmination of an aggressive and predatory campaign essentially waged against the people of PNG, by the Australian state, acting in conjunction with American imperialism.

The transparent aim is to lock the largest and most strategically-significant Pacific nation into Washington's preparations for an offensive war against China, which is viewed as the chief threat to American capitalism's global hegemony. The signing of the treaty is part of a broader offensive, aimed at forcing Pacific states to end their balancing act between Beijing, with whom they have increasing economic ties, and the western powers.

The character of the treaty is indicated by the frenetic character of its preparation. Australian corporate outlets have noted that the time between the floating of such a treaty and its signing, far less than a year, is record time for such agreements.

Then there is the hidden, but fairly obvious, Australian campaign against concerns and wavering from PNG. Albanese visited the country last month to sign the document. This was not possible after enough PNG government parliamentarians effectively boycotted a cabinet meeting that was scheduled to ratify it, resulting in the

meeting failing to achieve quorum.

At the time and since, prominent figures in the PNG political establishment publicly warned that the treaty would undermine the country's sovereignty, effectively ceding it to Australia. Whatever their calculations, some of which undoubtedly concern the impact of the treaty on Chinese investment, their statements reflect a broader popular sentiment.

While the full text of the treaty has yet to be published, its essential thrust is clear.

The main provision is an attempt to bind PNG to any military conflict that Australia embarks upon. In his remarks alongside Marape, Albanese described it as a "defence obligation similar to Australia's ANZUS treaty commitments, where we declare that in the event of an armed attack on either of our countries, we would both act to meet the common danger."

That requirement can only be understood in its context. As part of its frontline role in the US-led preparations for war against China, the Australian military, accelerated by the Albanese Labor government, is engaged in frequent provocations targeting China, including "freedom of navigation" operations near waters claimed by Beijing in the South China Sea and passages in the narrow waters separating Taiwan from the Chinese mainland.

Australia's military build-up, including its planned acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS pact, is intended to escalate such operations, which by their nature threaten open conflict with China. Under the interpretation advanced by Albanese, in the event of any such clash, PNG would be automatically at war with China.

In the lead-up to the signing of the treaty, Albanese and other Labor government ministers have repeatedly referenced the experience of World War II, during which PNG became a central hub of operations and a launching pad for allied forces in the Pacific theatre directed against Japan.

While the militarist character of the treaty was clear from Albanese's comments, its potential implications were

indirectly pointed out by Marape, who sought to alleviate fears that PNG would be forced to participate in such a conflict.

In comments to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7:30" program yesterday evening, Marape flagged the possibility that PNG would sit out a conflict between Australia and China. It would, he said, at least encourage peace before any involvement.

Speaking alongside Albanese, Marape implausibly claimed that: "This treaty was not conceived out of geopolitics or any other reason" but simply reflected the close proximity of the two countries and the connections of their people.

Marape was at pains to stress that the treaty would ensure that the people of the region "prosper."

In reality, even in that area, Australia's involvement is of an entirely predatory character. That was underscored earlier this year by Australia's agreement of a \$570 million loan, not aid package, to keep ailing infrastructure projects afloat. That was tied to a public demand for tighter foreign investment "screening," and no doubt a private insistence on the need to sign a treaty. An agreement for PNG to enter Australia's National Rugby League competition has also previously been tied by the media to the country agreeing to the treaty.

The *Strategist* noted in September last year that based on World Bank figures providing for a "multidimensional" measure, "74.5 percent of the PNG population is in poverty, ranking the country 120th among 122" examined by the international financial institution. That is a legacy of decades of Australian colonial rule, which only formally ended in 1975, and the continuing looting of the resource rich PNG by global corporations, many of them Australian, with the connivance of the local ruling elite in the decades since.

Australia is clearly seeking to exploit that misery, as well as a growing PNG government deficit, to further the war drive. That is the significance of a treaty clause providing for PNG citizens to serve in the Australian military. Marape has indicated that up to 10,000 of his countrymen could enlist.

The arrangement recalls the actions of the British Empire, forcing its colonial subjects to be on the frontlines of its dirty operations. It is a transparent attempt to address a "recruitment crisis" of the Australian Defence Force, which has scarcely grown in terms of enlistments in years due to widespread anti-war sentiment.

If the PNG citizens were recruited primarily into the Australian Army, as seems likely, they could come to represent a significant proportion of it. Figures last year indicated only 27,000 permanent members of the Australian Army, meaning the forecast 10,000 PNG citizens could constitute more than a quarter of it.

Another provision of the treaty grants the countries

expanded access to one another's military facilities. Given Australia's character as an influential imperialist power, and PNG's as an oppressed former colony, it is evident that in practice that will mean Australian access to PNG military facilities.

Such expanded access has been pushed for more than a decade. In 2010, as the Obama administration was preparing to launch the "pivot to Asia," a vast military build-up directed against China that has continued ever since, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited PNG in an unusual trip highlighting its strategic significance.

The US drive for a greater footprint took a step forward in 2023, with the signing of an agreement between Washington and PNG similar to that it has now struck with Australia. Since then, the US and Australia have been funding a major upgrade to the Lombrum Naval Base on PNG's Manus Islands.

In the hawkish US and Australian think tanks, it is openly discussed that Lombrum and other facilities in PNG would play a central role in a war against China in the Indo-Pacific, which by the geography of the region would inevitably centre substantially on naval conflict.

The neo-colonial defence treaty should be rejected by working people in Australia and PNG as yet another step on the path to such a disastrous conflict, which would claim millions of lives, devastate the region and threaten the world with nuclear annihilation.

In opposition to the militarist agreement from above, what is required is the unity of the working classes in the imperialist centres of Australia and New Zealand with the oppressed masses throughout the Pacific, in a common struggle against militarism, war, poverty and their sources in the outmoded capitalist system.



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