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Australia-Papua New Guinea Relations: New Pacific Way or Neocolonialism?

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Executive Summary

● Papua New Guinea (PNG) remains one of Australia's major bilateral regional relationships. Australia had been PNG's colonial administrator until independence in 1975, and the relationship remains close though, as is often the case, not consistently harmonious. Over 30 percent of Australia's bilateral aid package goes to PNG. Despite this assistance, many critics have said that PNG has squandered opportunities for development, and one notable think tank issued two major pieces in 2003, titled "Papua New Guinea on the Brink" and "Aid has failed the Pacific." Australian concerns have surfaced that PNG could become a "failed state" much like its neighbor, the Solomon Islands.

● The success of the multilateral (but Australian-led) Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) may have also been a catalyst for Australia to conduct and implement an Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP) with the PNG government.

● Separatist sentiments in Bougainville, while currently calmed, have been a major distraction for PNG's central government and have made foreign relations with Australia even more problematic. The environmental damage caused by copper mining projects (dominated by Australian corporations) has not yet been fully addressed.

● There are some critics who argue that Australia's new activism in the region is detrimental to the island states; such actions impinge on the sovereignty of Pacific Islands countries and signal a new neocolonial attitude on Australia's part. Supporters of the policy point out that while this activity benefits Australia's national interest in maintaining and enhancing stability in the region, the ECP is also meant to increase government efficiency and aptitude in PNG, thus providing greater services to the populace. Full implementation has stalled due to resistance by the PNG government (and grassroots protests) as well as Australian insistence of immunity from prosecution of their police officers and officials, though there are indications that the Australian government may back down from that requirement.

● PNG will remain a central part of Australia's foreign policy, irrespective of whatever relationship Australia has with the United States. More to the point, the Australia-U.S. relationship, especially in regards to the war in Iraq, may have a greater impact on Australia-PNG relations due to the sense of Australia's growing activism internationally and the potential for further intervention into PNG.

INTRODUCTION

Although much has changed for Australia in the international arena in the aftermath of the Bali bombings and the war in Iraq, its relations with Papua New Guinea (PNG) remain a constant and important part of its foreign policy. The Howard government has frequently been criticized as paying little attention to the island countries in Oceania, but recent events have resulted in a shift of focus, which has brought with it a consequent—and ironic—wave of criticism.

With the exception of a hiatus due to Japanese occupation during World War II, Australia was PNG's administering authority under League of Nations and later United Nations (UN) mandates until the granting of internal self-government in 1973 and full independence in 1975. Like many other decolonization experiences in Oceania, much of the impetus toward independence was brought from the top-down, with Australia responding more to international opinion for decolonization. While grassroots and other social movements for independence did exist in PNG, they were not the strongest reason for independence. There were, in fact, some segments of the population that hoped for an even closer connection with Australia. This absence of a strong indigenous decolonization movement is often cited as a factor in the relatively weak sense of nationhood within PNG, and the disparate population (some 700 distinct languages) within the state has never experienced a catalyzing event to coalesce as a nation.

With independence, PNG adopted a Westminster parliamentary form of government, though its adoption in a political culture that has more to do with personal relationships than party philosophies has been highly problematic. Electoral politics in PNG have been less about party identity and cohesion and more about personalities and personal reward. Electoral violence has not been uncommon, and political parties are numerous, practically insuring government by coalition. Parliamentarians crossing the aisle for better deals are also a frequent occurrence, and legislation requiring that elected government be allowed to stand for eighteen months before any no-confidence vote can be called has only been minimally successful in promoting government stability. Although it receives a significant amount of aid (more than 30 percent of Australia's bilateral aid budget goes to PNG), several critics have argued the aid has been squandered. In 2003, the Centre for Independent Studies, an Australian think tank, published two major analyses, the titles of which give the flavor of the kinds of conclusions being drawn—"Papua New Guinea on the Brink" and "Aid has failed the Pacific."

Questions of government stability and effectiveness have long plagued PNG, but Australia, while concerned, had always played a very hands-off role regarding such matters, fearing understandably that any advice/criticism would be seen as overbearing and even neocolonial. Academics and some policy makers expressed concern with Australia's northern "arc of instability" (which originally encompassed Indonesia and PNG then later the Solomon Islands), though domestic political will for direct action by Australia seemed absent. However, international events after the September 11 attacks on the United States, especially the Bali bombing of October 2002, have contributed to a willingness by Australia to initiate a more activist policy in the Oceania region. Frequently accused of doing little to aid PNG (and the island states in general), the Howard government now finds itself accused of doing too much and interfering with the "Pacific Way" of regional interaction that have been shaped over the last thirty years of regional meetings and politics.

BOUGAINVILLE

While it is an internal problem for PNG, secessionist sentiments in Bougainville remain a significant security issue, and this problem has had and will continue to have spillover effects for Australia. It is no exaggeration to suggest, as Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has, that the issue of Bougainville "distorted" Australia-PNG relations for nearly a decade from 1989-97. Certainly, considering the colonial legacy also clouding Australia-PNG relations, Downer could also be accused of understatement.

Geographically and culturally separated from the PNG mainland, Bougainville is a part of PNG due to colonial divisions and legacies rather than indigenous connections. The Bougainvilleans have always viewed themselves as separate from the rest of PNG and more culturally connected to the Solomon Islanders to the east. (It would be a mistake though to consider Bougainville a united group since many different linguistic groups coexist there). The desire by Bougainville to be part of the Solomons (or at least independent from PNG) was expressed as early as 1962. Conflict sparked after the closure of the Panguna copper mine in 1989. The mine was a significant part of PNG's revenues, but two major factors increased the tension on Bougainville. First, the migration of "redskins" from other parts of PNG to work in the mine caused resentment among the Bougainvilleans. Secondly, the environmental degradation caused by the mining activities exacerbated the perception that the Bougainvilleans were suffering all of the costs of the mine, while receiving very little of the benefits. Bougainville separatists used the environmental degradation issue as evidence of the lack of concern (and outright hostility) from the central government. The largest scandal occurred in 1997, when the PNG government hired the mercenary group Sandline International to deal with the separatist Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA). The uncovering of the Sandline Affair led to the fall of the government and was an embarrassment to the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF), which interpreted the hiring of mercenaries as an indication that the government did not think it could deal effectively with BRA.

After nearly a decade of fighting, both sides signed a truce in October 1997. A multinational Truce Monitoring Group (TMG) led by the New Zealand military was established and implemented. The use of individuals from Fiji and Vanuatu, who had the language skills and shared cultural affinities with the Bougainvilleans, greatly contributed to the success of the TMG, which was transformed into a Peace Monitoring Group (PMG) in May 1998. Transfer of leadership shifted from New Zealand to Australia with the institution of the PMG, but Australia was careful to maintain the multinational nature of the group. Talks on autonomy for Bougainville were concluded in 2001 and brokered by Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. Australia's role in settlement of the Bougainville conflict has been viewed as favorable in PNG, though that may be due to factors that do not currently exist in the larger context of Australia-PNG relations. Certainly, criticisms abound as to what many see as Australia's "new" activism in the region generally and in PNG in particular. Such criticisms were both tempered and exacerbated due to Australia's intervention in the Solomon Islands.

SOLOMON ISLANDS, HELPEM FREN, AND ENHANCED COOPERATION IN PNG

In 2003, Australia announced that it would lead a mission of "cooperative intervention" to restore law and order in the Solomon Islands. This announcement was greeted with optimism, though some criticized that such action was coming a little late in the game. The Solomons had been experiencing a conflict on the main island of Guadalcanal between the indigenous people of Guadalcanal (Guale or Isatabu) and the people from the neighboring island of Malaita, who had migrated to Guadalcanal in search of economic opportunities. (To define this conflict solely as one between Guales and Malaitans is to gloss over significant internal divisions and categorizations within each group, but the two major competing militia groups did use these identifications during the conflict). In June 2000, the elected government of Bartholomew Ulafa'alu was overthrown, just a month after the George Speight-led overthrow of the Chaudhry government in Fiji (contributing to the "arc of instability" image). Ulafa'alu had called for Australian military assistance to prevent the escalation of violence on Guadalcanal, but Australia in 2000 was hesitant to act so directly in the Solomons. Expressions were made in the press of the fear that Australian intervention in the Solomons would mean Australia would be "running the place for the next fifty to one hundred years," a thought that certainly gave many pause for consideration. However, Australia in the post–September 11, post–Bali bombing world proved more willing to intervene. (Though some critics consider it a sham justification, the Australian government noted that the 2003 request for intervention came with the unanimous consent of the Solomons Parliament, while Ulafa'alu's 2000 request, the Australians argue, did not). Called Operation "Helpem Fren," (tok pisin for "Help a Friend" and later retitled the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands [RAMSI]), the operation has been considered a major success in restoring law and order on Guadalcanal.

While RAMSI's first step toward law and order restoration in the Solomons has been very successful, the long-term maintenance of the peace remains in doubt. Certainly, the true measure of stability in the Solomons will rest on the shoulders of the Solomon Islanders themselves, but Australia will maintain a significant presence for the foreseeable future. While the military and police presence has and will continue to drop away, the installation of Australian civil servants into high positions in the Solomons government structure (notably in finance and law enforcement) will be the real test of RAMSI's value beyond a crisis management program. With the expectation of continued success with RAMSI, the Australian government proposed a similar type of program with PNG. Called an Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP), the plan is in essence similar to the second and ongoing phase of RAMSI. The ECP intends to put 230 police officers and 64 officials to work in PNG in the areas of justice, public sector management, border security, and transport. Full implementation has been delayed because of criticism from PNG officials that the program was a significant infringement on PNG's sovereignty. The criticism increased when Australia wanted immunity from prosecution for those officials it sent to PNG as part of the program. (Subsequent reports suggest that Australia will back down from this request.)

Australian resources and political commitment are obviously key to the successful implementation of the ECP, but equally important will be the local and regional support that the program receives. While RAMSI is frequently discussed as an Australian mission,

the Howard government has repeatedly noted (quite rightly) that the mission received not only the political approval of the Solomons Parliament and the Pacific Islands Forum, but was also composed of participants from various countries in the region. (The "R" in RAMSI does stand for regional, after all). The ECP, however, is slightly different in the sense that it is exclusively an Australian program. This distinction has certainly been an issue, and critics of the ECP have been quick to use the term "neocolonial" to describe the ECP. The Howard government has generally brushed aside the criticism, arguing that they have both a right to decide how to spend its aid money and even an obligation (to the Australian taxpayer) to see that its funds are being used efficiently. This latter understanding of the Howard government's motivation has received domestic support in Australia if not international approval.

It is clear that Australia intends to play a larger role in Oceania than it has, certainly in the last decade or so. It has announced a major increase in its aid package to the region, with PNG getting a significant increase of US$71 million, bringing Australia's aid package to PNG up to US$303 million (A$435.6 million). This increase is part of an overall increase to aid in the Pacific, which will more than double this fiscal year from US$122 million to US$266 million. Australia also intends to play a more substantial role in the Pacific Islands Forum, Oceania's premier regional organization. By informal tradition, the Forum's Secretary General has always been an islander, and the selection done by consensus. The 2003 Forum marked a departure to this tradition when Prime Minister John Howard put forward diplomat Greg Urwin as a candidate for secretary general, and pushed for the selection to be done by secret ballot. Both points were departures in the tradition of the Forum, and PNG's Prime Minister Michael Somare criticized the move as an end to the "Pacific Way" of politics that had governed much of the previous experience of the Forum. There is some conjecture that pressure was put on some island states to support Urwin, with Australian aid packages being the "stick" held over the island governments. The Howard government's response to these criticisms was to argue that the Forum itself had become largely irrelevant in the region and significant reforms were necessary to raise the Forum's profile. (An Eminent Persons Group was organized in 2003 with former leaders of the region to conduct a study on reforming the Forum, and its report has been submitted to the Forum Secretariat).

SPILLOVERS: OTHER RELATIONSHIPS

While Australia remains PNG's largest trading partner (some A$1 billion annually), Malaysia has quietly moved into second place at A$300 million (overtaking Japan). Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed generally had good relationships with PNG officials, and his controversial statements frequently irritated the Australians, much to the amusement of many in PNG (including those in government). While certainly not on equal terms, increased economic relations with Malaysia have helped PNG lessen some of its dependence on Australia. Mahathir's angry rebuttal to Howard's statements about the possibility of Australia conducting preemptive attacks in the region to defend itself from terrorists gained much resonance in the region, and PNG was certainly no exception. Indeed, many in PNG felt they knew better than most of Australian intervention in its affairs.

PNG's relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) is generally stable, having established relations a year after PNG's independence in 1976. The most notable event occurred in 1999, when PNG switched its recognition to Taiwan, reportedly in exchange for some US$3.5 million. This shift was instituted in the final days of the Skate administration and lasted only two weeks. The newly installed government of Mekere Morauta quickly switched its diplomatic recognition back to Beijing.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

There are few direct implications for U.S. policy regarding the Australia-PNG relationship. The Australian connection to PNG is long lasting and will continue to be so, outside of any other bilateral relationship. If anything, the relationship between the United States and Australia—regarding the war in Iraq and the greater Global War on Terrorism—has significant spillover effects on Australia's extension in Oceania generally and in PNG in particular. Australia's participation in the war in Iraq and its successful (so far) intervention in the Solomon Islands have seemed to increase its international confidence, and it does seem more willing today to use its resources and influence closer to home. Australia's worries about an arc of instability to its north have now been coupled with the political will to intervene at some level in some of these countries.

To the extent that RAMSI and the ECP increase the stability of the Solomon Islands and PNG, this will benefit Australia and the rest of the international community. To the extent (less likely, but the potential exists) that Australia's new interventionism (especially the ECP) is resented as Australia "reasserting" its neocolonial position in the Pacific, the long-term resentments could increase and fester in the region. To the extent that Australia's activities can be portrayed as part of a Western intervention, it could be used as another point in the rallying cry against "Western imperialism." This last scenario is generally unlikely, especially in Oceania, which is still very much pro-Western and, in any case, programs like the ECP have been seen as distinctly Australian rather than Western. In many ways, Australia is caught in a no-win situation, criticized for not doing anything when trouble hits and criticized for doing too much when it tries to take a more activist position in Oceania.