



Security Nexus Perspectives

# PERCEPTIONS OF U.S. POSTURE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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In Papua New Guinea (PNG), activities by the United States were highly visible in World War II, but have steadily declined ever since. This decay in international relations has been more obvious since the early 2000s when it is contrasted with the [rise of Chinese-PNG relations](#) on a political level and on a person-to-person level through infrastructure development and overseas education. The 2011-2012 Obama era Pivot and Rebalance to the Pacific produced a small increase in attention, but this soon waned and is already forgotten.

Despite this, there is widespread pro-American sentiment due not only to the war, but to various similarities, such as, democratic governance, capitalist economies, and religion. Although the average citizen associates that war with Australia & Japan, the U.S. is remembered in places like Oro, Milne Bay, Rabaul, Lae, and Finchafen/Salamua ) where legends and oral stories are told of U.S. forces.

More importantly, Hollywood, and the tech giants, Facebook and Microsoft, provide daily touchpoints that promote U.S. technology, culture, and values. The leadership of the U.S. in global influence has rendered most people in the world at least partly familiar with American views on politics, economics, military, development aid, and cutting edge research. Nevertheless, the personal relationship is absent and people at the grassroots level do not feel a significant, let alone strong U.S. presence in Papua New Guinea, in the same way that they do with [Chinese presence](#).

The U.S. has strengthened its embassy in PNG, hoping to improve relations and render PNG a stable partner. The [focus of the relationship](#) is on improving transparency, governance, public health and gender equality. Further, it combats drug and people trafficking, and protects fisheries. Cooperation in the military arena focuses on joint humanitarian exercises and the training of military personnel.

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U.S. entanglement in PNG is concentrated at the national level in development aid (monetary, scholarship, infrastructure, national security) and technical expertise (expatriate consultancy in legal, policy, budget support). In fact, [scholarships](#) are very limited with usually only one Fullbright MA per year, a spot at the East-West Center in Hawaii, and a non-degree Humphrey scholarship. In light of this, only very few Papua New Guineans are directly touched by these U.S. efforts, and they tend to be elites with minimal benefits reaching general society.

Papua New Guinea is a large country with around nine million people and it is expected to grow much larger. There are thus multiple viewpoints with regard to U.S. posture that range from not thinking that U.S. posture has any impact at all to promoting partnership with the U.S. as the only choice that makes any sense. [Neutrality is the most common](#) expectation of PNG politicians, who seek to opportunistically benefit from both Beijing and Washington for as long as possible. However, neutrality is viewed by some as a weak stance indicative of a lack of decision-making capacity and a lack of vision in governance.

The most positive, but minority perspective promotes the strengthening of PNG's traditional [relationship with Australia](#), and by extension with the U.S. Proponents of this viewpoint suggest that it is wiser to side with the leader of the "Free world" than with one known to be a maverick. Backing this up is the reliance on the dominance of U.S. military might. Thus the buildup of Chinese military might is a direct threat and could flip this power-based argument.

Others argue that U.S. ties with Australia are actually detrimental to perceptions of U.S. posture, particularly in the economic and social arenas. There were very clear reasons for PNG's about turn and its Look North policy that began to strengthen relations with China. Adding to negative perceptions are Australia's and U.S. support of Indonesia and silence on what Papuans believe is the "[illegal annexation](#)" of West Papua, which has resulted in 200-500,000 deaths.

Perhaps the most troubling of all to PNG and other Pacific Islands, is the U.S. stance on climate change, and the hypocritical Australian stance that involves recognizing climate change, but selling more coal than everyone else on the planet. The [Boe Declaration](#) designated [climate change and sea level](#) rise as the primary concern of all Pacific Islands, and an existential security threat that threatens to destabilize, and indeed, destroy many countries. The stance on climate by both the U.S. and Australia is seen to be a [direct threat by all Pacific Islands](#). This creates an underlying lack of trust and deep dissatisfaction that is forcing the Pacific towards other [non-traditional partners](#), such as China.

If the U.S. is to improve its opportunities moving forward in the Pacific, it needs to address these long-term festering problems that are affecting current relationships in a meaningful and significant manner, or even attempt to resolve them completely.

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