



## ***WILL PAPUA NEW GUINEA SIGN A BILATERAL SECURITY DEAL WITH CHINA?***

BY MOSES SAKAI

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In September 2023, China [approached](#) Papua New Guinea (PNG) with an offer for a security deal to help PNG's internal policing. This January, after [riots](#) in PNG's capital Port Moresby, talks continued between PNG and China, according to PNG Foreign Affairs Minister Justin Tkachenko. While China's [security deal](#) offer "has not been accepted at this point in time" (according to Tkachenko), the United States through its Deputy Secretary of State Richard Verma has [urged PNG to reject](#) the offer on the basis that such security deals, including investments with China, usually come with a high cost and that China has not shown interest in the modern "rules-based order." But, given that the Chinese offer is already on the table, will PNG take it?

The Chinese security offer to PNG has become a geopolitical concern for Washington and Canberra because US and Australia have been PNG's two-decades-long [traditional security partners](#). In addition, PNG Prime Minister James Marape [stated](#) in December at an investment conference in Sydney that there were no talks for a security deal between his government and the People's Republic of China when he visited Beijing in October for the Belt and Road Forum.

PNG's security environment needs much improvement and modernization in policing and

defense. Although PNG launched and implemented the [Defense White Paper](#) and [National Security Policy](#) in 2013, much remains unachieved due to budget constraints. By 2017, only [138 out of 235](#) key tasks identified in the White Paper were implemented, due to less government investment in the PNG Defense Force.

As part of efforts to modernize its security environment in policing and defense, PNG in recent years has signed several security agreements with bilateral partners. These agreements cover issues including training and capacity building, border protection, maritime surveillance, UN peacekeeping missions, humanitarian assistance, cyber security, and climate change. These bilateral security agreements usually provide a framework in which two consenting parties or states agree to deepen ties and enhance cooperation within the security space, while at the same time respecting each other's sovereignties.

PNG signed three security agreements in 2023. On the defense side, PNG signed a status of forces agreement with the [United Kingdom](#) in April and the [Defense Cooperation Agreement](#) with the US in May, as well as a whopping A\$200 million [Framework for Closer Security Relations](#) with Australia on the policing side in December. With Australia, the security agreement was considered [historic](#)—the largest security agreement PNG has ever signed with her closest neighbor since independence in 1975. In 2022, PNG also [signed the SOFA](#) with France, the first country in the Pacific to do so with French armed forces in New Caledonia.

PNG has also extended its security ties to a few non-Western countries. In 2010, PNG signed a [DCA with Indonesia](#), the only Asian country with which PNG shares a border with by land and the agreement was finally [ratified](#) by PNG in late February this year. In 2013, [PNG signed a special agreement with Israel](#) for PNG Defense Forces and police personnel to be trained by Israeli military, although a DCA with Israel is perhaps still under negotiation.

But some may consider a bilateral security offer from China reasonable because, in 2013, the National Executive Council (i.e. PNG's cabinet) under the

government of the former Prime Minister Peter O'Neill [approved a K170 million \(\\$50 million\) defense budget](#), the largest ever approved since independence, meant to upgrade the PNG Defense Force's (PNGDF) fleet. The former Defense Minister Fabian Pok was tasked by the NEC to travel to China to secure the approved fund through a loan. But there is no evidence whether the loan was secured or not. Also in 2017, China [supported the PNGDF](#) with a total of \$3 million in military equipment as part of preparing PNG to host the 2018 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, although PNG also received such [support](#) from other bilateral partners.

PNG has had good diplomatic relations with China for almost 50 years. Also, China is an important economic partner. In 2018, PNG was the first country in the Pacific region to [sign up](#) for China's Belt and Road Initiative. Although the US and its ally Australia have the same diplomatic relationships (almost 50 years) with PNG, they have deeper roots with the island country, including in the Pacific during and after World War II, and consider the region their sphere of influence. As a key rising regional player, China's involvement in PNG, and the Pacific more broadly, has been seen by the US and Australia as a threat to the international rules-based order, especially in the security space, and the Solomon Islands' security deal with China in 2022 has [become a concern](#) to the US and Australia.

While the US and China have their own interests in PNG and the Pacific, their influence is not seen by PNG and its Pacific neighbors as a geopolitical game, something the US and its allies need to understand, although great power competition remains a [concern for Pacific countries](#). However, Dame Meg Taylor, the former secretary-general of the Pacific Islands Forum who [emphasizes](#) the "[friends to all and enemies to none](#)" foreign policy common to the Pacific Islands, at the 2024 PNG Business Council Outlook meeting [cautioned](#) business community leaders, including politicians, to be careful when dealing with the political expansion of the West and East:

[w]e are seeing the rapid expansion and influence of China and the US in our region, both with their own

interest. China's interest is power expansion and the US is more military expansion. What this says about our country (PNG) and the region that we are in is that, while they are powerhouses, our leaders have the opportunity to collectively speak up of the Pacific Interest.

Being the first-ever political leader in PNG and the Pacific to address the National Parliament of Australia in early February this year, Marape, after thanking Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government for the recently signed security deal, twice [stated](#): a strong economically empowered Papua New Guinea means a stronger and more secure Australia in the Pacific.

The US and its ally Australia have played a significant role in shaping the PNG's security environment in recent decades. While PNG respects the notion of the US and Australia as PNG's "traditional security partners," the country also has every sovereign right to establish new security arrangements with bilateral partners, including China. Internal policing is still a major issue in PNG, leading to a recent law and order breakdown. It has also become a major impediment to PNG's economic progress. And since 2019, after the [election of Marape as the prime minister](#) through a vote-of-no-confidence motion, [law and order](#) was prioritized as the key focus area in the national budget.

A move by PNG to make new security arrangement with bilateral partners like China is not a shift from its traditional bilateral security arrangements with US and Australia, but rather an extension of the PNG's bilateral security arrangement, as PNG needs support from its other bilateral partners to address its ongoing internal security issues at the domestic level, including other external security threats.

The traditional security arrangements which PNG has with US and Australia remains intact despite the geopolitics in the security space. However, for PNG to increase its law enforcement efforts, support is required to improve its internal policing and capacity, and that is the area where traditional security partners should step up.

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