

Enhancing the future of Australia-Papua New Guinea-US relations

Sean Jacobs



REGIONAL OUTLOOK

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Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCCC	China Communications Construction Company Ltd
COFA	Compacts of Free Association
COP	Conference of the parties
DCA	Defense Cooperation Agreement
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NBN	National Broadband Network
PDI	Pacific Deterrence Initiative
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PNG	Papua New Guinea
PNGDF	Papua New Guinea Defence Force
PRC	People's Republic of China
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
US	United States

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Introduction

In 2018, at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Papua New Guinea (PNG), United States Vice President Mike Pence more than 'bumped up' PNG's geostrategic profile, announcing a trilateral security commitment with Australia to revamp PNG's fledgling Lombrum Naval Base at Manus Province.¹

PNG is regionally important, not just due to Beijing's growing interest in the Pacific nation but, with a fast-growing population of 11.8 million,² PNG is larger than New Zealand, and considered a leader among its Melanesian neighbours: Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.

Pence's agreement, in addition to the Biden-Harris Administration's release of the United States' "first ever"³ Pacific Partnership Strategy, and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's intensification of PNG ties, is creating an observable change of tempo in the relationship between the three nations. The landmark US-PNG Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA), inked in May 2023 by PNG Prime Minister James Marape and Secretary of State Blinken, adds to this mix.⁴

Much of this optimism, however, will depend on the delivery and tangible outcomes of these strategic commitments. This is particularly important amid recent escalated tensions in the Middle East and the political focus the US will be paying to the Middle East in the immediate to medium-term. Washington DC will need some guidance in its Pacific focus, simply because the region has largely stayed off the US political radar since at least World War II.

Having worked at the strategic level of Australian national security policy, as well as 'on the ground' in PNG and with all levels of its government, I put forward a number of practical observations in this paper on the sequence of US and Australian commitments. This is based on being 'delivery focused', while also appreciating PNG's current and future political climate.

Overall, the US, PNG and Australia have a sound basis to grow a more formal trilateral relationship. Yet it will be a relationship that requires governmental upkeep and political vigilance.

A long but thin history: The Eagle and the Kumul

In 2010, while working with the Governor of Port Moresby—PNG's capital—I can recount the buzz of then-US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's official visit to PNG. With the streets lined and the fanfare palpable, I recall thinking at the time that many Papua New Guineans had not witnessed a visit from any comparable senior US Government figure since, at least, General Douglas MacArthur in World War II.

MacArthur was stationed in PNG in the early 1940s to halt the Japanese advance. Indeed, much of the United States' historical and contemporary appreciation of PNG and the wider Pacific is built around the immense US sacrifices in the Pacific theatre—the Battle of the Coral Sea, Guadalcanal, Midway.

More recently, US policymakers have also tended to frame the Pacific Islands as the three US Pacific Territories—the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, American Samoa—and the Compacts of Free Association (COFA) states of Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of Marshall Islands, and Palau. While not absent from US focus, the 15 other Pacific Island states, which include PNG, clearly do not share the same political-legal links to the mainland US and, for obvious reasons, simply do not command comparable political, fiscal or diplomatic attention from Washington DC.

A new partnership?

Yet this is changing. President Biden's September 2022 announcement of "the first ever"⁵ Pacific Partnership Strategy was built on US Vice President Harris' July 2021 acknowledgement, in front of Pacific leaders at the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), that the US had not "given the Pacific the support it deserved."⁶ It was a frank and unprecedented admission, catalysing Blinken's two visits to the region—in as many years—and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's July 2023 trip to PNG—another first.

Built on four core objectives—partnership, connection, resilience, empowerment—the United States' broader regional Strategy is certainly breaking new ground. It is framed upon a range of escalated regional commitments, which notably includes a reestablishment of a regional USAID mission based in Fiji, the reopening of US embassies in the Solomon Islands, Tonga and Kiribati, and the (re)deployment of Peace Corps volunteers—important in terms of re-establishing small but powerful people-to-people links.⁷ PNG-specific opportunities from the Strategy include:

- The new DCA, in parallel with a wider US Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI), which strengthens military capabilities and partner country capacity.⁸
- Climate-Smart Infrastructure to enhance regional net-zero related goals and access for US private sector renewable energy firms. Also in parallel to this commitment is the Boosting Long-term U.S. Engagement in the Pacific Act (BLUE Pacific Act), which elevates "the countries of Oceania as a strategic national security and economic security priority."⁹
- Law enforcement training from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).¹⁰
- Capacity building to fight cybercrime, from a total funding pool of US\$1.6 million.¹¹
- Combating wildlife trafficking, from a total pool of US\$3.25 million.¹²
- An additional US\$18 million for the PNG Electrification Partnership which, notably, was first announced by Vice President Pence at APEC 2018, and included PNG, Australia, Japan and New Zealand.¹³

Notably, in addition the existing PDI and BLUE Act, the US is not starting its PNG relationship from scratch. Since PNG's independence in 1975, the US has maintained an Ambassador to PNG, and to date most of its PNG funding has supported public health initiatives, as well as fisheries protection and disaster preparedness and response.¹⁴

These links have been refreshed by the DCA—a fifteen-year agreement that aims to improve PNG's defence, disaster, and humanitarian assistance responsibilities, improve US–PNG joint military training, and the staging of US troops and equipment in PNG. The agreement was signed in parallel with a maritime agreement that, in the words of PNG Prime Minister James Marape, would give the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF) "the ability to know what is happening in its waters—something we have never had since 1975."¹⁵

While some instances of localised opposition have emerged from within PNG—centred on the potential for increased militarisation and a supposed 'immunity' for US troops—Marape quickly responded to and belayed these concerns. "This signing today in no way shape or form encroaches into our sovereignty ... [or] terminates us from relating to other defence relationships or bilateral relationships we have," he said in May 2023. "This is a straight two-way highway between the Pentagon and Murray Barracks, between Washington and Waigani, the US and PNG."¹⁶ Lloyd Austin, upon visiting in July 2023, further clarified that "we are not seeking a permanent base in PNG," underlining the focus of the agreement to deepen an already existing relationship and modernise PNG's defence capabilities and enhance interoperability.¹⁷

Australia and PNG: No greater friends

At the same time, Australia has also announced renewed commitments to PNG, with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese underscoring earlier this year that both nations are “the greatest of friends.”¹⁸ The Prime Minister used his January 2023 address to the PNG Parliament to present a familiar positive roll call of PNG–Australia bonds, signalling an expansion to Australia’s migrant worker program with PNG. Similar to the United States and its plans to recommence regional Peace Corps Volunteers, migrant worker schemes also result in productive people-to-people outcomes—a unique commitment that Beijing cannot genuinely replicate.

PNG’s relationship with Australia is different to the US–PNG relationship in three ways. The first is historical. From 1902, Australia administered the Papuan mainland and, following World War I, the outer New Guinea Islands. After World War II, both territories were administered jointly before PNG gained independence in 1975. Through a range of notable Australian Governors, Foreign Ministers and Administrators, Australia largely targeted infrastructure development and programs of self-development and self-reliance to meet PNG’s then relatively small-scale needs.

The second difference is scale. Australia’s annual aid program to PNG hovers at approximately AUD\$500 million per annum, there are around 10,000 Australians living in PNG¹⁹, and bilateral trade is AUD\$7 billion—minor in global terms but significant for PNG.²⁰

The third major difference is the level of not only governmental but *political* focus. In 2017, then Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced Australia’s Pacific ‘step up’—a suite of significantly expanded Australian assistance and foreign policy measures. As Turnbull noted at the time, the comprehensive initiative was aimed at “an irreversible and permanent step-up in our commitment” to the Pacific.²¹ Ostensibly, Australia’s grand ‘step up’ was aimed at mitigating China’s growing regional influence, with Turnbull later announcing the AUD\$140 million investment in PNG’s under-sea telecommunications cable — a move clearly intended to counter Huawei’s bid to build a cable to PNG and the Solomon Islands.²² More recently, in 2022, the Australian Government responded swiftly to China Mobile’s speculated takeover of PNG Digicel, providing a AUD\$2.4 billion government backed guarantee to Australian telecommunications giant Telstra to secure Digicel’s Pacific acquisition.²³

It is also important to note that the ‘step up’ was an offer for greater connectivity, integration, and trade, matched with a respect for sovereignty, and building stronger bilateral relations. Importantly, for example, Turnbull spoke at length about the core values pinning the ‘step up’ commitments together — “freedom, democracy, the rule of law, mutual respect” while noting, importantly, that these were not only “timeless values . . . but never more timely than they are today.”²⁴ In PNG, it has tapped a historical reservoir for more meaningful relationships to grow and build upon into the future—a reservoir that the US is only now itself drawing on. The delay to an Australia–PNG agreement of a similar nature suggests the Marape Government is belying domestic concerns over sovereignty issues, especially around security and defence. The October 2023 appointment of a PNG Government Lieutenant Colonel to command the Australia Defence Force’s Townsville 3rd Brigade, however, suggests a wise political move on the part of both governments to signal greater defence links and intent.²⁵

China and PNG

PNG's relationship with China may not be as deep as Australia's. However, it is growing in width. This is motivated by the PRC's "escalating influence"²⁶ in the Pacific, and its advance for a region-wide security and economic agreement that fell only slightly short in 2022.²⁷ It is a mixed and "forthright" Chinese approach to the region, observe scholars John Blaxland and Jennifer Maroney, "with soft loans, apparently favourable security deals, and financial inducements, coupled with flashes of "wolf warrior" diplomacy and threats of a range of punitive measures."²⁸

In PNG, these actions have collectively resulted in PNG's diplomatic support of China for contentious issues at the United Nations and The Hague, a sharp and unprecedented uptick in official bilateral visits, and an elevation of the bilateral relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership—China's highest form of diplomatic relationship.²⁹

Other examples of recent enhanced PNG–China relations include:

- In November 2017, the gifting of Chinese military equipment to the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) comprising 62 military vehicles worth US\$5.5 million. This included 44 troop carriers, 10 armoured vehicles, four buses, four mobile kitchen vans, and spare parts. This grew from a donation of 44 vehicles in 2016.³⁰
- A US\$470 million loan from China's Exim Bank comprising two signature projects — the NBN1 3/4G project and the Kumul undersea cable. This is additional to a US\$56 million Chinese loan for PNG's National Data Center.³¹
- In 2018–19 Chinese-owned construction companies won bids for more than half of the ADB-financed construction projects in PNG. The largest ADB contract since, valued at US\$54 million, was awarded to China Railway.³²
- The PNG government reconfirming its 2016 agreement with Huawei to build PNG's domestic internet infrastructure, knocking back a trilateral counter-proposal from the US, Japan and Australia.
- Establishing the US\$1.4 billion Chinese State-owned Ramu NiCo mine — China's largest Pacific investment, which has a projected lifespan until early to mid-2030.³³
- The renewed commitment to, and continuance of, the US\$2 billion Ramu 2 hydro power project in PNG's Eastern Highlands Province by China's Shenzhen Energy Group.³⁴
- In 2020, the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the establishment of a fisheries precinct (artificial island) at PNG's Daru Island — 200 kilometres from the Australian mainland.³⁵

PNG: open for (strategic) business

Reluctant to overtly pick sides, PNG has absorbed its renewed strategic interest by essentially declaring itself as non-committal to all nations, establishing itself in 1993 as part of the Non-Aligned Movement.³⁶ Indeed, from my time in Canberra over a decade ago, I recall PNG's senior government officials consistently presenting themselves to Australia's leadership as a potential 'broker' between Canberra and Beijing, while also being a generally willing recipient of assistance. A more contemporary example of this was former PNG Health Minister Jelta Wong's comment, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, that "We are thankful to Australia for giving vaccines and we are thankful to China for giving vaccines. Both countries help us in many ways, and we will always be in debt to them for the times Papua New Guinea was in need and they came to our aid."³⁷

In frank terms, the PNG Government's balancing act may not be deliberate but most likely emerges from an incapacity to get the strategy right. Indeed, one overarching observation of PNG's successive governments over the past decade has been a 'disorientation' in terms of strategic intent. In 2012, for example, there appeared a growing optimism around PNG being part of the Asian Century,³⁸ with talk of PNG joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and becoming more of an Asian power rather than a Pacific one.³⁹ An unusual momentum was setting in. A defence white paper, the first of its kind for PNG, was even drafted and released.⁴⁰

Yet this momentum has abated, which I sense has been ultimately driven by PNG's ongoing internal fractured politics. Indeed, PNG's political fragmentation is well-recorded,⁴¹ with over 800 languages and thousands more distinctive tribal groupings.⁴² The nation also "suffers", in the words of Francis Fukuyama, "from both excessive scope and insufficient strength."⁴³ Political consensus—let alone governing effectively—is clearly limited in this type of arena, and the corollary is an absence of long-term and coherent, agreed-upon strategy. The domestic Covid-led challenges faced by the Marape Government in the previous term, after the departure of relatively long-serving Prime Minister Peter O'Neill, also undermined strategic consistency, although the current Marape Government is designing a Foreign Policy White Paper at the time of writing.⁴⁴

Prime Minister Marape will need to more clearly articulate where he sees PNG in the world, especially as the strategic environment changes and PNG becomes more of a fundamental player in the contest between the PRC on the one hand, and Australia and the US on the other.

Appreciating the politics

For Australian and US policymakers, there are two key elements to understand in terms of where Marape and future PNG governments may want to take things. Or, in other words, where policymakers may need to greater appreciate PNG's 'politics' and its relevant implications.

The first is the consistent elevation of climate change as an advocacy platform. PNG, like many Pacific nations, has leveraged this issue to appeal to larger nations, in international forums such as the Conference of the parties (COP) and in terms of profile building. It is a leverage point that I suspect will only continue. Unfortunately, its persistence as a tactic to elevate PNG's international profile within these forums has the result to 'crowd out', in the words of small island state expert Godfrey Baldacchino, "awareness of and concerns and funding for other, more mundane and immediate, policy priorities on SIDS [Small Island Developing States]: poverty reduction, health promotion, infrastructure provision, human resources and skills development and avenues for international mobility."⁴⁵ PNG suffers from all of these immediate issues, and US and Australian leaders will do well to keep these concerns on the trilateral agenda, given that an international climate change agreement is highly unlikely to resolve issues such as skill development, for example, or health promotion.

The second element for US and Australian policymakers to appreciate is a ruthless focus on the 'economics' from PNG's political leaders. While values are fundamentally important to agreements such as the 'step up', one cannot go past how much of a premium PNG's contemporary leaders place on business relationships, which can emerge at the expense of strategic commitments. A minor but symbolic example of this was recently revealed by the PNG Foreign Minister, who noted the reason why PNG essentially dropped its links with Taipei was because it derived little economic benefit from the relationship.⁴⁶

Toward a better future

The combination of these trends results in a number of currents in and outside of PNG—a PNG government that will only become more assertive in seeking what is best for PNG, renewed interest from the US, an equally interested Beijing, and an Australian government with long-term PNG interests and an important degree of cultural fluency.

Most commentary and advice on how best to advance joint US and Australian interests in the wider Pacific has focused on the need for “out of the box” thinking, and deliberate and combined planning.⁴⁷ Other observations speak of the need “to collaborate more effectively to meet growth and security goals” in the region, “tailoring to place”, and demonstrating an “understanding and respect for Pacific objectives, and a willingness to work with regional institutions.”⁴⁸

These are all sound proposals. And the themes of the United States’ Pacific Strategy seem to capture these ideas and get the balance right—partnership, connection, resilience, empowerment.

Yet as the Strategy moves toward implementation, it might be more useful to think about sequencing US commitments along the lines of two areas. The first is being ‘delivery focused’. This is important for the obvious reason that the reception and success of the Strategy, as well as Australia’s ongoing commitments, will hinge on deploying assistance that will be delivered in a timely manner. Concerns have already been raised regarding the delay of US Congressional approval of renewed Pacific islands funding.⁴⁹

The second area I have termed is ‘appreciating the politics’. Associated recommendations will be important as they will help in enhancing Australian and US legitimacy and, at the same time, preserve the importance of reciprocal commitments on PNG’s leaders. This will also be fundamentally important in building legitimacy where it counts most—among PNG’s citizens.

Delivery focused

A delivery focus starts with comparing US and Australian Lombrum Naval base upgrades to Beijing's adjacent efforts within proximity to the facility. While some small-scale work has been achieved at Lombrum since the announcement was made in 2018,⁵⁰ the Beijing backed subsidiary China Communications Construction Company Ltd (CCCC) has delivered a full upgrade to Momote Airport—a 20-minute drive from the base. This highlights an area where Beijing has significant PNG advantage—capacity for tangible expedited delivery.

Areas to consider where the US and Australia can think about 'speeding up' strategic delivery efforts may include four high level considerations.

The first is to fully realise the future potential of Lombrum, especially the accommodation of larger naval vessels. This is considered unfeasible at this time due to the harbour size. According to naval expert Carlyle Thayer, "To accommodate larger vessels than currently planned, the harbour would need to be dredged at least two metres, the current wharves would have to be widened and extended and more support infrastructure would have to be built (refuelling, ammunition and other storage)."⁵¹ Here US support is essential. According to a Royal Australian Navy (RAN) study, "To be credible... this option would require the participation of the United States. The costs and relevant expertise would make it difficult for Australia to shoulder the responsibility unilaterally."⁵²

The second may be establishing a nongovernmental delivery entity. This concept is adapted from the late US Ambassador to the Pacific Steven McGann's proposal for a PNG team that interfaces with the US Embassy country team. As McGann notes, a vehicle like this would "not be encumbered by bureaucratic constraints, administrative restrictions or personnel guidelines that impede agility and flexibility in implementing policies and programs."⁵³ My suggestion is to give this entity a specific 'delivery' or even geographic focus within PNG, perhaps adjusting this away from a broad remit of priorities. A specific trilateral PNG–Australia–US vehicle—or even a company limited by guarantee—would be useful to consider in the context of deploying a creative approach to responding to PNG's challenges.

A third area to consider is to seize upon an already identified, high impact and low-cost initiative, such as rebuilding PNG's radio. The current radio network suffers from a transmitter problem—the national broadcaster has only one in three that are operational at any one time, according to analyst Shane McLeod. Radio is a potent form of communication in PNG's difficult geographical terrain and, as McLeod notes, an investment of AUD\$10 million could see the radio network emerge as fully operational and could be achieved at a fractional cost compared to other high tech or digital interventions.⁵⁴

A fourth area to consider is an increased US diplomatic presence in PNG, accompanied by an increase in discretionary funding—or even enhanced political latitude—for the US Ambassador and selected in country team members. This would create space for making expedited decisions and a capacity to seize emerging opportunities. A positive example of this potential was the counter-offer for Huawei's 'Kumul' submarine cable which, although not forthcoming, is a useful illustration of intelligence reporting, trilateral relations and a capacity to build a firm counter bid with strong political backing from Canberra, Washington and Tokyo.⁵⁵ These are precisely the sorts of solutions not just American but also Australian diplomats should be pursuing in PNG.

Get political

For the US to enhance its PNG relationship it must appreciate PNG's contemporary political landscape. And here there are seven high level factors that will play a part in this.

The first is the US weighing the tangibles and intangibles of delivery. As noted above, PNG's leaders have a pragmatic focus on PRC, Australian and US relations. The US Pacific Partnership and the DCA are important in signalling Washington's commitment to PNG and its leaders. It will be important to think about how US assistance measures can have tangible and direct impacts on PNG's citizens. The Peace Corps Volunteers, for example, stimulate people to people bonds in a way that is similar to Australia's labour mobility and sports diplomacy initiatives. Any commitment to appeal directly to people will enhance US legitimacy and, while these soft power initiatives can be difficult to measure in terms of empirical evidence, it is important US and Australian policymakers are not too scientific here. There is an intangible goodwill outcome that in itself will be important to continue. Here, for example, the US Navy mercy missions are capable of achieving significant amounts of goodwill.⁵⁶ Military training—in particular a Pacific Patrol Boat Program and establishing a regional military college—has been identified as an important element of shoring up American and Australian defence assistance in the region.⁵⁷ Specific non-military missions also create soft power people-to-people links that will only be increasingly important. It would be advisable to upscale these missions to enhance relationships.

The second factor is thinking about 'hard' and 'soft' infrastructure solutions. Part of appreciating the politics in PNG is that Beijing will be heavily invested in PNG for some time. And the PRC is likely to continue its bid to build hard infrastructure in PNG and other places in the region — roads, bridges, dams, data centres. Yet often missing are the 'soft' skills to effectively run these facilities in the medium- to long-term. By contrast, Australian and US assistance generally places a premium on human capital and 'soft' skills — project management, governance, finance, administration. As I have suggested elsewhere, "it may be worth exploring a 'joint facility' arrangement, where appropriate, and when diplomatic relations permit. This would help mitigate the 'white elephant' criticisms of new aid projects but is also more likely to receive strong endorsement at a political level in PNG."⁵⁸ Notably, there are a small number of existing 'trilateral' examples to draw from — the 2015 Australia-China-PNG malaria pilot control project⁵⁹ and the 2014 PRC-New Zealand-Cook Islands Water Partnership.⁶⁰

The third factor may be for the US to link the DCA to the stationing of largescale naval US vessels at Lombrum. While specifics of the agreement have not been shared, one hopes US negotiators have factored this in, given the agreement does cover elements of the facility.⁶¹ Consistency with the 1985 South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty—otherwise known as the Rarotonga Treaty—will be important to appreciate as part of any major and agreed upgrades to the facility.⁶²

A fourth factor is to emphasise local sovereignty. As noted, PNG leaders are highly likely to leverage the issue of climate change to serve what Godfrey Baldacchino notes as "additionality" by "arguing for the tweaking of climate change funding policy such that it would supplement, rather than replace, existing funds and project priorities."⁶³ While US and Australian governments—politically and otherwise—are strongly supportive of climate change assistance initiatives in PNG, thought should also be given to support local projects, with local ownership, that tackle sustainability issues closer to home in PNG's communities—sanitation, waterway health, waste collection, stormwater solutions, adaptation, and relocation. This may be a good way to also recognise PNG's many leaders and individuals at the sub-national level.

A fifth and final factor is the need for sustained political presence. While President Biden was unable to visit PNG for the DCA due to domestic debt ceiling commitments, and the recent Middle East crisis is set to detract from the US Pacific commitment, it should be recalled that Vice President Harris broke new ground by addressing the PIF—the region's most important political forum—and using language of inappropriate US "attention and support" that was unprecedented.⁶⁴ A US PIF diplomatic presence will now be permanent, however, thinking about the rolling attendance of political leaders will also be important. As the late US Secretary of State George Shultz noted, "diplomatic visits are an important expression of presidential priorities."⁶⁵

Conclusion

There are certainly sound building blocks for the future of PNG, Australia and the US relations. Clearly, follow-through will be important to the arrangements and commitments that have so far been put in place, most recently by the US and its ambitious new Pacific Partnership Strategy and a PNG-specific DCA.

At the same time, PNG will continue its PRC relationship and this relationship will likely grow in the near- to medium-term. Yet this offers opportunities for US and Australian governments and leaders, providing incentives for both nations to enhance and evolve their assistance regimes. As I have outlined, this can be achieved by being delivery focused and, at the same time, appreciating PNG's political trajectory.

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