

2021

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### Recommended Citation

Moore, John D. (2021) "Letter from Port Moresby," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 74 : No. 4 , Article 10.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol74/iss4/10>

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## LETTER FROM PORT MORESBY

*John D. Moore*



Source: "Papua New Guinea," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 17 August 2021, [wwwnc.cdc.gov/](http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/).

As the world shifts away from the global war on terrorism toward renewed great-power rivalry, areas previously considered strategically peripheral offer the United States and its allies both opportunity and challenge. Papua New Guinea (PNG), with its strategic location in the southwest Pacific, is poised to play a role in this new "Great Game." American engagement with PNG and other Pacific Island nations that focuses on collaboration with regional allies and that smartly applies U.S. political, financial, and military power will be a key factor in the outcome. At the same time, understanding the broader regional set of

interests of allies and opponents alike will better inform policy making and improve the potential for positive policy outcomes.

### A COMPLEX PLACE

Although it achieved its independence in 1975, PNG still is beset by multiple development challenges, akin to those experienced elsewhere in the Pacific and

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parts of Africa. Yet, as seen in the national introspection displayed at the February 2021 passing of PNG founding father and first prime minister Sir Michael Thomas Somare, the country continues to show the potential to move beyond its current challenges.<sup>1</sup> To those fortunate enough to have lived and worked in PNG, it is at once a

Naval War College Review, Autumn 2021, Vol. 74, No. 4

breathhtakingly beautiful and a frustratingly complex place to engage. With over 850 languages, thousands of clan and subclan groups, an overlay of Christianity on local belief systems, and over 70 percent of its population living in rural—often highly rugged—areas, the complicated nature of the country cannot be overstated.<sup>2</sup> PNG occupies the eastern half of the western Pacific island of New Guinea, together with the key islands of New Britain, New Ireland, and the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, along with some six hundred lesser islands and atolls.<sup>3</sup> PNG, with an estimated population of eight million, is the largest and most populated of the countries composing the Pacific Island area. In addition to its human complexities, PNG has an incredible diversity of geographic and natural resources.

Sharing a long land border with Indonesian Papua, PNG is a young, modern nation-state, but one that reflects and holds onto a much longer history.<sup>4</sup> The trials of traditional society coming to grips with modernity have shaped PNG for decades and also will influence the way it engages, and is engaged by, the evolving rivalry between the United States and its allies and a strengthening China and those countries within its orbit. There is limited government penetration across the country, and many of the present development challenges are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Limited institutional capacity, lack of a governmental monopoly on violence, a limited formal economy, and the need for a political leadership that can articulate, garner support for, and implement public policies that represent a shared sense of national interest are but some of the issues that PNG faces. It is essential to understand these challenges, as they shape directly the way in which the growing competition to establish favorable regional relations is unfolding.

### A STRATEGIC POSITION

PNG's previous colonial power, Australia, which managed it after World War I, has a deep and enduring relationship with its northern neighbor. PNG remains Australia's largest recipient of foreign aid, and strong ties continue between the Australian Defence Force and the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF). PNG dominates the northern approaches to Australia; that, added to historical tension with Indonesia and increasing Chinese involvement in PNG and the region, explains why Australia's interest in maintaining a leading role in PNG is likely to continue.

While Australia plays an outsize role in PNG, multiple other countries also have substantial ties to the country. Japan long has been an aid donor to PNG and maintains strong diplomatic ties, and New Zealand similarly is a leading donor. Ties between PNG and other Melanesian countries, such as Fiji, continue to strengthen and grow. At the same time, Chinese diplomatic and economic



Source: Shugart, "A Chinese-Built Airport?"

investment in PNG has increased, including involvement in a mix of infrastructure projects (including energy, roads, and airports) on mainland PNG, as well as the islands of Manus and Bougainville. Similarly to the pattern seen in other countries, PNG's leaders seek to benefit from multiple points of investment in the country without compromising its sovereignty.

While memory of the combat that engulfed the then territory of New Guinea remains a key part of Australian and PNG military lore, most Americans long have forgotten their country's involvement in the campaign, much less New Guinea's strategic role in supporting the American advance through the Pacific.<sup>5</sup> Some seven thousand American soldiers and airmen were killed during the New Guinea campaign, with missing-in-action records indicating that hundreds more were lost in the jungles and seas across mainland PNG and its surrounding islands.<sup>6</sup>

Since the 2018 U.S. commitment to join Australia's effort to upgrade the PNGDF's Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island, many elites in Port Moresby view the country as having reemerged onto the U.S. radar. Others may recall Manus Island as playing a part in the much-debated Australian asylum-seeker policy. One of PNG's twenty-two provinces, the island sits north of the PNG mainland and is positioned along critical air and naval lines of communication linked to U.S. outposts in the Marianas and elsewhere in the Pacific.<sup>7</sup> Its position enables naval and air assets based on the island to influence the area along

Australia's eastern seaboard south to New Zealand, as well as the approaches to maritime East Asia.<sup>8</sup>

Manus, as well as other locations in PNG, complements efforts by the United States, Australia, Japan, and their allies to expand and enhance maritime-surveillance networks to monitor vessel traffic and conduct early warning, while assisting the PNGDF to increase its basic maritime-reconnaissance and patrol capabilities. While the country is unable to house major USN surface combatants without significant and sustained investment, pre-positioning of fuel and other stocks in PNG can assist vessels operating in the region. Meanwhile, advances in aerial, surface, and subsurface unmanned capabilities hold the potential for the establishment of a network of interlocking microbases across the Pacific, in which Manus could play an important role. In addition to Manus Island, locations elsewhere along PNG's northern and eastern areas may offer the potential for both fuel pre-positioning and the basing of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets in the future. Engagement also can span other areas of mutual interest, including research into tropical diseases, countering illegal fishing, monitoring changes in coastal as well as blue-water environmental conditions, and maritime emergency response.

#### RELATIONSHIPS ARE WHAT MATTER

While PNG offers opportunities to support U.S. and coalition naval operations, stronger diplomatic and military relations with PNG and other Pacific island nations are likely to prove even more critical than the physical basing of supplies or naval assets. Lessons from the Cold War, as well as post-Cold War engagement in the Middle East and South Asia, repeatedly have demonstrated that relying on merely transactional approaches rather than longer-term relation-building efforts—whether conducted in bilateral or multilateral settings—limits the potential for lasting positive outcomes. Other lessons underscore the dangers of mission creep and overreach, along with the problematic impacts that occur when tactics are mistaken for strategy.

The U.S.-Australia relationship is a cornerstone of American policy in this part of the Pacific, but Australia has limitations in its ability to manage regional engagement across the strategic-operational-tactical continuum. Given Australia's historical connections to PNG, along with PNG's proximity as Australia's nearest neighbor, successive governments in Canberra have pushed to be the lead partner for PNG and the medium through which Washington should engage with Port Moresby. Over the decades, Australia regularly has advised the United States and other allies to "leave PNG to us."<sup>9</sup>

However, the rising competition with China has seen the Australian position moderate in recent years, as Canberra aims to collaborate with Washington and

others to counter Beijing's growing political and economic investment in PNG. The need for the United States to bolster, and on occasion strategically to realign, allied engagement in the region is reflected in recent divisions within the Pacific Islands Forum and subsequent concerns that China may take advantage of such rifts, should Australia prove unable to resolve them effectively.<sup>10</sup> In turn, while Australia welcomes further U.S. engagement in the region, Canberra has valid concerns over any U.S. engagement that might smack of the clumsiness Washington has shown in other regions. Genuine partnership and a willingness by Canberra and Washington both to lead and to follow, depending on shifting situational dynamics, are needed.

Capitalizing on joint efforts in the development space as a platform for increased military cooperation is not just smart but essential. The Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP) is one such framework, with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States working with the PNG government to support the country's target of providing 70 percent of the population access to reliable electricity by 2030 under the AIFFP's Papua New Guinea Electrification Partnership.<sup>11</sup>

Chinese involvement in Bougainville is an ongoing concern for Australia and the United States, as are Chinese efforts to establish a fish-processing facility on Daru Island, which is located only a few kilometers from Australia's northern border and some two hundred kilometers from its mainland.<sup>12</sup> Chinese engagement in PNG has seen several Chinese parastatal and Chinese Communist Party-linked private-sector companies build ties to local politicians and businesses. As part of its regional initiative, China has become an increasingly important source of loans and other financial support to the PNG economy, and Beijing remains an important export market for PNG's natural resources.<sup>13</sup> A Chinese-government *Guide for Foreign Investment and Cooperation*, published in January 2019, gives insight into Beijing's intent. The document characterizes PNG as a supporter of China's Belt and Road Initiative, with the closing paragraph stating, "The Chinese government calls on more powerful Chinese companies, inspired by the Belt and Road Initiative, to carry out reciprocal trade and invest in PNG."<sup>14</sup>

While the discussion of so-called debt trap diplomacy has ebbed and flowed, of likely greater importance than a specific debt percentage of gross domestic product owed to Beijing is the way Chinese loans (or other state-to-state engagements) are structured and governed. By allowing local elites access to these rent streams, China builds local leverage. Such leverage may not prove lasting, however; there are few obvious sociocultural ties between the PNG and Chinese peoples, and thus the extent to which Beijing can use transactional relationships to exert more-overt control over PNG's external orientation remains to be seen.

The Manus example is informative. At the same time as the joint Australian-U.S. effort at Lombrum is under way, Manus Island Momote Airport, financed primarily by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), is being upgraded by China Harbour Engineering Company, a subsidiary of China Communications Construction Company (CCCC).<sup>15</sup> Worthy of note is that CCCC reportedly is supporting the construction of China's artificial island bases in the South China Sea, so Washington has targeted it for potential sanctions.<sup>16</sup> According to politically astute Manus Islanders, the current governor is "pushing above his weight" and does not necessarily have broad support, even as he attempts to use Chinese economic involvement to advance his own narrow interests.<sup>17</sup>

While local political leaders may seek to use the rivalry with China to their personal advantage, there remains a reservoir of positive sentiment toward the United States. The historical memory of the American role in Manus and elsewhere in the vicinity during World War II is key to this, with the generation of elders who lived during that period passing on stories to successive generations. Yet geostrategic interests need both to respect and to value local pragmatism about the people's socioeconomic aspirations.

#### ENGAGEMENT FORWARD

In looking toward fostering a new era of U.S.-PNG relations, it is critical that the United States keep its eyes wide open regarding the country's reality. Local politics increasingly has become a means for elites to capture wealth, with the views and actions of elected leaders not necessarily representing the actual interests of the communities with which the United States may engage. Australia's engagements in PNG and Oceania offer insights into how the United States best can build and sustain long-term political-military relationships in support of American interests. USN port visits and humanitarian-assistance and disaster-relief operations, along with public-relations efforts, will continue to prove important. Participation alongside the Royal Australian Navy in training exercises with PNG counterparts, combined with U.S. provision or funding of equipment and logistical support for PNGDF littoral operations, also provides opportunities for naval forces to engage with PNG and to shape U.S.-PNG relations positively.

Beyond these traditional forms of engagement, an increased tempo of visits from U.S. Indo-Pacific Command personnel, combined with efforts by the U.S. State Department and other government agencies to strengthen diplomatic and economic relations, at the same time as the United States builds further collaboration with Australia and other allies in the region, is critical. The eventual opening of the new U.S. embassy building in Port Moresby will be an important milestone in the growing American commitment to PNG, with embassy reach strengthened by the integration of a defense attaché office within the diplomatic mission.<sup>18</sup> Additional

interagency involvement that draws on the principles espoused in the Global Fragility Strategy would bolster efforts to strengthen U.S.-PNG relations further.<sup>19</sup>

While collaboration with Canberra and other regional capitals is essential, it also is important for Washington to foster a distinctly U.S. relationship with the PNG state and its diverse people. In PNG there is a rare spirit of openness and friendship toward the United States that often is absent in other parts of the world. Yet that sense of goodwill is insufficient absent U.S. political and economic, as well as military, investment. With China able to use strategic investments to peel away layers of elite support, engagement in PNG and elsewhere is not cost-free, yet the transactional nature of China's engagement to date offers the United States the opportunity to strengthen ties with both PNG's government and its society.

China's rise does not necessarily imply that future conflict is destined. However, where a vacuum of U.S. and allied engagement and investment exists, Beijing will be poised to fill such space. As the strategic landscape continues to evolve, ensuring a permissive peacetime environment for maritime operations while strengthening political and military relationships well prior to any potential war-fighting scenario is fundamental. The United States must work with other nations, not alone nor solely with existing regional allies. America must act with humility and listen to those with more insight regarding regional, country, and subcountry dynamics.

From the perspective of those in the region, Washington should pursue a multidimensional approach that understands and appreciates differences between "like-situated countries" that are more concerned about risks arising from great-power rivalries and those countries that are like-minded and willing to oppose the weakening of a liberal, rules-based order. Countries across the region have different interests and drivers and have different, and occasionally competing, foreign-policy priorities, as well as different capacities to counter Chinese pressure.<sup>20</sup> Efforts to move beyond the transactional aspects of state-to-state relations to relations based increasingly on shared values ultimately will prove more lasting and more supportive of American interests.

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#### NOTES

1. Somare was a prominent PNG political leader. Often called the father of the nation, he was a teacher and radio journalist before his 1968 election to the territorial House of Assembly. Appointed chief minister of the territory in 1973, he became the country's first prime minister upon independence in 1975, and served again as prime minister on two other occasions. His formal political career ended in 2012.
2. The main religion in PNG is Christianity, although, like elsewhere, pre-Christian belief systems continue to shape the interpretation and practice of religion. For a more detailed



- overview of Christian denominations and religious minorities present, see U.S. State Dept., “Papua New Guinea,” in *2019 Report on International Religious Freedom* (Washington, DC: Office of International Religious Freedom, 2019), available at [www.state.gov/](http://www.state.gov/).
3. The other half of the island is part of Indonesia, with West Papuan independence and associated claims of Indonesian human-rights abuses an ongoing issue. PNG is divided into four regions, with a total of twenty-two provinces across the different regions, as follows: Highlands Region—Hela, Jiwaka, Chimbu, Eastern Highlands, Enga, Southern Highlands, and Western Highlands; Islands Region—East New Britain, Manus, New Ireland, Autonomous Region of Bougainville, and West New Britain; Momase Region—East Sepik, Madang, Morobe, and West Sepik (Sandaun); Southern Region—Central, Gulf, Milne Bay, Oro, Western, and the National Capital District.
  4. PNG’s settled history is thousands of years old, with European (British, Dutch, German) engagement increasing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
  5. It was over the PNG island of Bougainville that U.S. airmen intercepted and shot down a Japanese bomber carrying the architect of Japan’s Pearl Harbor attack, Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, in Operation VENGEANCE. For details of U.S. soldiers and airmen repatriated from PNG, search the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) records available at [www.dpaa.mil/](http://www.dpaa.mil/).
  6. “Pentagon Enlisting Outsiders to Help Search for US WWII MIAs,” *Chicago Tribune*, 19 September 2015, [www.chicagotribune.com/](http://www.chicagotribune.com/).
  7. See Thomas Shugart, “A Chinese-Built Airport Next Door to a Key Australia-US Naval Base?,” *The Interpreter*, 7 August 2020, [www.lowyinstitute.org/](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/). Manus Island is the largest island in what is known as the Admiralty Islands.
  8. See Ben Wan Beng Ho, “The Strategic Significance of Manus Island for the U.S. Navy,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 144/12/1,390 (December 2018), available at [www.usni.org/](http://www.usni.org/).
  9. Jonathan Pryke, “The Curious Case of Aid Concentration in Papua New Guinea,” *The Interpreter*, 14 February 2019, [www.lowyinstitute.org/](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/).
  10. Tess Newton Cain, “With Five Countries Set to Quit, Is It Curtains for the Pacific Islands Forum?,” *The Conversation*, 15 February 2021, [theconversation.com/](http://theconversation.com/).
  11. Current connectivity is 13 percent. For additional detail on the AIFFP, see AIFFP, “Papua New Guinea Electrification Partnership,” media release, 30 June 2020, [www.aifffp.gov.au/](http://www.aifffp.gov.au/).
  12. For a more detailed look at Chinese involvement in Bougainville, see Rowan Callick, “Real Cost of Independence: The Referendum in Bougainville Brings Risks and Opportunities for Australia and China,” *The Australian*, 8 December 2019, [www.theaustralian.com.au/](http://www.theaustralian.com.au/). Bougainville often is seen as a potential bellwether; should it achieve independence, other provinces in PNG also may seek to secede. Like Bougainville, East New Britain and New Ireland have a closer cultural affinity to the Solomons than to Papua New Guinea, while Enga in the western highlands always has had a physical and political remoteness from Port Moresby.
  13. In 2018, data from Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade showed China as the third-largest recipient of PNG exports, behind Australia and Singapore, with Japan in fourth place. See Australian Government, Dept. of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “Papua New Guinea—Papua New Guinea’s Global Merchandise Trade Relationships,” fact sheet, [dfat.gov.au/](http://dfat.gov.au/).
  14. Graeme Smith, *China’s Guide to Investment Cooperation in Papua New Guinea*, In Brief 2019/25 (Canberra, ACT: Australian National Univ., n.d.), available at [dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/](http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/).
  15. The ADB’s two largest funders since its inception are Japan and the United States. The People’s Republic of China is the third-largest contributor to the ADB, with Australia the fourth.
  16. Shugart, “A Chinese-Built Airport?”
  17. Bill Bainbridge and Jack Kilbride, “Lombrum Naval Base: Manus Governor Slams Australia over Plans to Develop Joint Naval Base,” *ABC News* [Australia], 20 November 2018, [www.abc.net.au/](http://www.abc.net.au/).
  18. The new U.S. embassy will serve Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands.

19. For details on the Global Fragility Strategy, see U.S. State Dept., *2020 United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability* (Washington, DC: 2020), available at [www.state.gov/](http://www.state.gov/).
20. Kuyoun Chung, "Why South Korea Is Balking at the Quad," *East Asia Forum*, 31 March 2021, [www.eastasiaforum.org/](http://www.eastasiaforum.org/).

