

Australian think tank proposes military base on PNG's Manus Island

Patrick O'Connor
30 July 2013

The *Australian* newspaper yesterday published a comment by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Sam Bateman and Anthony Bergin, urging the Labor government to rebuild a World War II-era military base on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island.

The government is currently preparing the island to detain up to 3,000 asylum seekers, under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's plan to illegally deport all refugees arriving in Australia by sea. For more than a decade, successive Liberal and Labor governments have used so-called border protection, ostensibly directed against refugees, as a pretext for a substantial military and intelligence build up to Australia's north and northwest.

As a result, there is already a large naval presence around the country's two main Indian Ocean territories, Christmas Island and the Cocos Islands. These are near the strategically important naval trade routes connecting China and East Asia with oil and raw materials suppliers in the Middle East and Africa.

The significance of these areas was further heightened by the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific. Obama's "rebalance" is aimed at maintaining US domination of the entire region, by encircling China and preparing for a potential military assault on it. A key part of Washington's "AirSea Battle" war plan involves the US and its allies closing off the naval choke points north of Australia.

Now the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a government-funded think tank that has the closest ties to the military and foreign policy establishment, is urging an increased naval and air force presence in Australia's former colony of Papua New Guinea (PNG).

In their article, "Manus military history of merit,"

Bergin, ASPI's deputy director, and former Australian navy commodore Sam Bateman seize on recent comments by the PNG parliamentarian for Manus Island, Ronnie Knight, who declared he would not support the refugee detention centre being constructed unless the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) took over the running of the island's Lombrum base, to patrol nearby waters for illegal fishing activity.

After declaring that "you can't talk about strategy without a map on the wall," the authors explain: "As was shown during World War II, Manus is a fine strategic location that dominates this part of the Pacific... Australia should increase its maritime presence in the archipelagic arc to our north. RAN's use of Manus would greatly facilitate that presence. As well as naval facilities, its Momote airfield would be a valuable base for Australian and allied maritime surveillance aircraft."

Bergin and Bateman make no pretence that such a military build up in Australia's former colony would have anything do with either refugees or illegal fishing.

Instead, a Manus facility is promoted as a way of bolstering the Obama administration's military focus on East Asia and the Pacific: "The US is interested in new bases in the Pacific. At the same time, the island countries are looking to the US to demonstrate that it appreciates the importance of the Pacific islands region in Washington's rebalance policy towards Asia. Manus could be an option."

The island base was first developed by the US military in 1944, after American-led forces invaded Manus and removed the Japanese troops. An official Australian naval history explained: "From the naval point of view, the principal attraction of Manus is the great Seeadler Harbour, with its more than 100 square miles of anchorage and depth of water sufficient to

accommodate the largest fleet. The Americans immediately began to develop the Seeadler Harbour area into a huge base, rivalling Pearl Harbour, which was used in later operations against the Japanese... When the Pacific War ended, Manus had been developed into one of the most powerful bases in the world.”

ASPI’s Bateman and Bergman add that by the time of the US invasion of the Philippines in late 1944: “There were more than 800 ships in Seeadler Harbour, Manus Island. Base installations included large wharves and floating docks, four major airfields, living quarters for 150,000, a 3,000-bed hospital and fuel depots, supply stores and repair workshops.”

After World War II, one historian explained: “The United States clearly placed high priority on retention of Manus as a permanent base.” (Roger Bell, “Australian-American discord: Negotiations for post-war bases and security arrangements in the Pacific 1944–1946”, *Australian Outlook*, 1973.)

Negotiations between Washington and the Labor government of Prime Minister Ben Chifley broke down as Canberra attempted to work closely with the US, while at the same time limiting Washington’s influence in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere in the South Pacific. This provoked private denunciations from US State Department officials of “Anzac imperialism.”

By mid-1946, however, US regional priorities had shifted to north-east Asia. The Manus facilities were largely dismantled before the base was handed over to Australian control in 1949. It was maintained as part of Canberra’s colonial rule of PNG, and then transferred to Papua New Guinean control in 1974–75 as part of a transition to formal independence.

ASPI’s proposal that Australian imperialism rebuilds the Manus naval-air base is another indication of rapidly escalating geo-strategic tensions in the region.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)