

Deals establish Australian neo-colonial control over Nauru, PNG security policy

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In two pacts struck this week, the Australian Labor government has sought to establish control over the security and foreign policy decision making of Nauru and Papua New Guinea. The deals underscore the role of Australian imperialism, as a predatory power in the South Pacific, and one that is central in the US war drive against China.

The agreements took slightly different forms. In the case of Nauru, a tiny country with a population of less than 13,000, the deal was a blatant neo-colonial power grab.

Evidently, it was deemed unwise or impossible to impose a similar arrangement on Papua New Guinea (PNG), which has a population of almost 13 million and far more regional weight. So Australian security powers were quietly attached to a plan, announced with much fanfare, for PNG to have a team in the Australian National Rugby League competition.

Regardless of the slightly different mechanisms, the response in strategic circles and the media made clear that the two deals were part of a single diplomatic push. The coverage in Australia has been striking, for openly gloating over the country assuming dominance over the Pacific countries, and thereby striking a blow at China.

Two headlines in the *Sydney Morning Herald* approvingly noted that Australia was seeking to “China-proof Nauru.” The state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation crowed: “In a contest of influence in Papua New Guinea, Australia triumphed over China through our shared love of footy.”

The deals, and the response, are highly revealing. They show that behind the Labor government’s cynical references to a “Pacific family,” Australia is aggressively laying down the law to the Pacific states, in partnership with the US. This again underlines the sham character of Washington and Canberra’s invocations of “sovereignty” and “freedom” when justifying one or another predatory military operation abroad.

In announcing the agreement with Nauruan President David Adeang in Canberra on Monday, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese outlined its far-reaching provisions.

Under the deal, which would come into effect “as soon as

possible in 2025,” Albanese said: “Nauru and Australia have committed to mutually agree to any engagement in Nauru’s security, banking and telecommunications sectors, and to consult on any engagement in other critical infrastructure. Nauru has also committed that third party engagement in critical infrastructure will not be used for security purposes.”

That is, the Australian government will have veto powers over all of the key elements of Nauru’s diplomatic and foreign policy, and will dominate its financial and communication infrastructure, and anything else deemed “critical.”

The sum paid for such vast powers is contemptuously meagre. Canberra will provide \$100 million towards budget aid over five years, to be used on social and economic policies. Another \$40 million will go to policing and security, further solidifying Australian control.

Australia has long exercised substantial authority in Nauru. For decades, it was the scene of an offshore detention centre for refugees who had attempted to seek asylum in Australia. Empty for years, the Nauru facility is again housing asylum seekers as the Albanese government steps up a bipartisan offensive against immigrants and refugees.

The impulses behind the urgency with which the Nauru pact has been signed were highlighted by discussions in think tanks this year. A comment in February in the *Strategist*, a publication of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, warned that Australia’s grip on Nauru may be weakening.

It pointed to the fact that in January, Nauru reestablished ties with Beijing, ending its recognition of Taiwan. The international community including Australia has de facto recognised Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan, since the 1970s.

A number of Pacific states, however, acting under pressure from Washington, have recognised Taiwan instead of Beijing. That has been viewed as a touchstone of their commitment to rejecting any Chinese influence in the Pacific and remaining under the wing of the US and its allies, including Australia. It has also been used to justify the

increasing promotion of Taiwanese separatism by American imperialism, which has inflamed tensions with China as a potential flashpoint for war.

The *Strategist* noted that Nauru's shift from recognising Taiwan to Beijing coincided with the construction of a port development by the island state, by the China Harbour Engineering Company. Under the deal struck this week, Australia will have effective control over that port, despite it being built by a Chinese concern.

The Nauru agreement is almost identical to one the Albanese government signed with Tuvalu in November. Under that deal too, Australia secured veto rights over all military, police, telecommunications and infrastructure agreements between the tiny Pacific state of 11,000 people and any other country.

In the case of Tuvalu, Australia exploited the climate change crisis, which will render the islands uninhabitable. It promised eventual residency rights in Australia to Tuvalu's population. At this stage, however, just 280 "climate refugees" will be permitted to enter the country each year. Labor, meanwhile, has presided over an increase in Australia's carbon emissions, including through the opening of new coal and gas projects.

The PNG deal was dressed up with an arrangement, reportedly worth \$600 million over a decade, under which Australia and the rugby league authorities will subsidise the development of a PNG National Rugby League (NRL) team, to join the competition by the end of the decade. At a press conference, Albanese hailed the "friendship" and common sporting passions of the two nations.

In the lead up, the press was blunt about the underlying purpose of the arrangement, with comparisons to the "ping pong diplomacy" that led to US President Nixon's visit to China in 1972 and the thawing of relations. This time, however, rugby is involved and it is directed against China.

The announcement had barely been made, when the Australian media reported that the arrangement included a clause that could scuttle PNG's involvement in the NRL and all of the sporting subsidies, if the country entered into security arrangements that were opposed by Canberra. The parties involved have dodged questions, but have not issued any clear denials.

Concerns have been raised about PNG's ties with China, after its government representatives this year repeatedly emphasised their desire not to pick sides in geopolitical conflicts, and their determination to enter into favourable commercial arrangements with any party. Cynically utilising the nation's sporting interests, and its cash-strapped finances, Canberra is insisting that PNG now choose a side.

The Pacific has been a focus of the US confrontation with China, since the Obama administration unveiled its "pivot to

Asia," a diplomatic offensive and military build-up directed against Beijing, in 2011. As that program was being developed, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited PNG in 2010, indicating the extent of US preoccupation with the Pacific state. Washington has for years been anxious to gain greater access to PNG's ports, which are the most advanced in the Pacific.

A turning point in the confrontation in the Pacific came in early 2022, when it was revealed that the Solomon Islands had signed a pact with China that included a security and policing element. The Australian ruling class was immediately up in arms, with hysterical warnings of a Chinese military base being built in the region. In the May 2022 election, Labor, then in opposition, declared that this was a failure of the then conservative government. It joined with the media in threatening "consequences," if the Solomons proceeded with any security arrangements with Beijing.

Since Labor's election, its Foreign Minister Penny Wong has continuously been visiting the Pacific, bullying and hectoring its leaders to toe the line in their alignment with the US and warning against any turn to Beijing.

The latest deals underscore that this militarist push against China has been the signature policy of the Labor government, which is transforming Australia into a frontline state for war, including through the largest expansion of the military since World War II and a vast extension of US basing arrangements.

The Pacific and its island states were a key theatre of World War II, and it is clear they are being primed to play a similar role in a future conflict, which would be of an even broader and more catastrophic character.

Labor's aggressive role again exposes the fact that Australia is not simply a patsy of the US. Its collaboration with Washington is aimed at securing Australian imperialism's interests, especially its dominance over the strategic and resource rich Pacific. PNG was effectively an Australian colony until 1975, while Nauru was also occupied by Australia earlier in the 20th century, along with the British and New Zealand.



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