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U.S.–Papua New Guinea Relations: Issues for Congress

Overview

The Independent State of Papua New Guinea (PNG) lies in a region of the southwest Pacific known as Melanesia on the eastern side of the island of New Guinea. It is the most populous Pacific Island country (PIC), with about 9.8 million residents belonging to hundreds of tribes. In 1975, PNG gained independence from an Australian-administered United Nations trusteeship and became a member of the Commonwealth. Parts of PNG had experienced periods of German and British rule beginning in 1884 and Australian administration since 1906. The country, which shares a land border with the Indonesian province of Papua, is a member of regional organizations such as the Pacific Islands Forum and the Melanesian Spearhead Group.

One of three PICs that have military forces (the other two are Fiji and Tonga), PNG has at times been seen as strategically important to the United States. During World War II, 7,000 American soldiers and airmen died in the New Guinea campaign, and the nearby Battle of the Coral Sea was considered a turning point of the conflict. Since 1945, the United States has played a relatively minor role in PNG’s economy and security, although the United States has on occasion pursued economic opportunities such as investment in natural gas production. Since around 2018, U.S. engagement with PNG has expanded, driven in part by U.S. perceptions that influence of China is increasing, both in PNG and the Pacific Islands region.

The United States established diplomatic relations with PNG in 1975. The State Department describes PNG as a “likeminded democracy” and a “key partner for the United States in the Indo-Pacific region.” In May 2023, the two countries signed a defense cooperation agreement (DCA) and an Agreement Concerning Counter Illicit Transnational Maritime Activity Operations. The DCA aims to “increase stability and security in the region,” according to the State Department.

Politics

PNG is a parliamentary democracy. Although its constitution promises free and fair elections, election-related violence and violations of secret balloting have routinely compromised this principle, according to the State Department. James Marape, the current head of government, became prime minister in 2019. Marape played a key role in parliamentary maneuverings that prompted the resignation of the previous prime minister, Peter O’Neill. Marape defeated O’Neill’s chosen successor in a subsequent leadership vote and went on to win re-election in PNG’s 2022 general election. Marape leads the Pangu Party, which has a plurality of parliamentary seats and governs in coalition with the United Resource Party, the National Alliance Party, and others.

Economy

PNG is richly endowed with natural resources, including precious metals, natural gas, timber, and fisheries. The Economist Intelligence Unit projects that PNG’s real gross domestic product growth will accelerate from 3.4% in 2023 to 3.9% in 2024. PNG’s largest trading partners are China, Japan, and Australia. U.S.-PNG goods trade totaled \$190.3 million in 2022, and the United States had a \$42.1 million trade surplus. ExxonMobil signed a February 2022 deal to develop the P’nyang gas field in Western Province, which feeds Exxon’s existing liquefied natural gas plant in PNG.

Figure 1. Papua New Guinea



Sources: CRS (map); World Bank; CIA, *World Factbook*.

Despite its resources, PNG ranks 156th out of 187 countries on the U.N. Development Program’s Human Development Index, which measures per capita gross national income, life expectancy, and educational attainment. According to the U.N. Children’s Fund, 40% of the population in 2022 lived below the National Poverty Line, and the country’s health care system is fragile. PNG also has one the highest HIV/AIDS prevalences in the Indo-Pacific. Obstacles to PNG’s development include poor infrastructure, lack of government capacity, inadequate supply of skilled workers, and unstable commodity prices.

U.S.-PNG Relations

The 2023 U.S.-PNG DCA allows the U.S. military to develop and operate out of bases in PNG with the PNG government’s approval. The State Department asserts the DCA will enhance security cooperation, improve the capacity of the PNG Defense Force, and facilitate bilateral and multilateral exercises and engagements, including disaster relief efforts. Launched the same day as the DCA, the Agreement Concerning Counter Illicit Transnational Maritime Activity Operations addresses gaps in PNG’s maritime governance capacity, including by allowing the island nation to participate in the U.S. Coast Guard’s Shiprider program. The United States has Shiprider agreements with approximately one dozen PICs, allowing their law enforcement officers to embark on U.S. naval and Coast Guard ships in order to search vessels suspected of violating laws and to combat illicit fishing.

In 2022, the State Department announced a 10-year strategic plan for PNG as part of a nine-nation U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability. The PNG strategic plan focuses on strengthening community capacity to prevent, mitigate, and respond to violence; supporting sustainable and equitable economic growth; improving justice systems; and professionalizing security forces.

U.S. assistance to PNG includes efforts to combat infectious diseases including HIV/AIDS, enhance law enforcement capacity, and expand renewable energy. In May 2023, the U.S. government announced \$45 million in new funding to PNG for various programs, including efforts related to conflict mitigation, anti-corruption, and climate resiliency. The United States also supports PNG’s disaster preparedness and response capabilities. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), in partnership with Australia, Japan, and New Zealand, is carrying out a five-year (2020-2025) Papua New Guinea Electrification Partnership that aims to increase access to electricity to 70% of PNG’s population by 2030. About 20% of PNG nationals had access to electricity in 2020.

According to the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand are the top three aid grantors to PNG, while the Asian Development Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Japan are the top three lenders. A January 2022 report stated that Australia will provide a \$580 million loan and grant package for upgrades and refurbishment of several priority ports in PNG, including on Manus Island north of the PNG mainland. The United States first established a base on Manus Island during World War II. Some observers view Australia’s assistance in part as an effort to counter China’s influence in PNG and the region. They describe the move to develop Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island, initiated in 2018, as seeking to head off Beijing’s interest in the island for potential military use.

China and PNG

China is PNG’s largest trade and investment partner, and the two countries established a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” in 2018. Former Prime Minister O’Neill

reportedly met with Chinese leader Xi Jinping more than a dozen times and was the first Pacific leader to sign on to China’s Belt and Road Initiative in 2018. According to the Lowy Institute, China’s aid and investment in PNG include construction, infrastructure, mining, industrial zones, and telecommunications projects worth \$1.6 billion, including \$1.4 billion in loans since 2008. China’s largest ongoing investment project is the Ramu nickel and cobalt mine.

Some analysts say PNG’s indebtedness to China may give Beijing political leverage in PNG and greater influence in the region. Other observers suggest that Prime Minister Marape has sought to balance relations with China on the one hand and the United States and its allies in the region (particularly Australia) on the other. Marape has reportedly stated, “We engage the Chinese government as long as it’s fair and friendly to us on our terms.”

Climate Change and the Environment

Coastal communities in PNG face rising sea levels and coastal erosion related to climate change. PNG is environmentally biodiverse, with habitats as varied as tropical heaths and grasslands, cloud forests, savannas, swamp forests, and diverse marine environments. It also has glaciers and mountains over 4,500 meters high, as well as numerous rare species. USAID has worked with PNG to protect its rich biodiversity, which is under threat from mining, logging, and land clearing for palm oil plantations. In 2022, USAID announced an \$18.5 million effort to conserve PNG’s forests and combat climate change.

Bougainville Autonomy

Between 1988 and 1997, an armed secessionist movement on the island province of Bougainville, located in eastern PNG, battled the PNG Defense Force, resulting in 15,000-20,000 deaths. In 1997, the PNG government and Bougainville leaders brokered a cease-fire and, in 2001, signed a peace agreement. Australia led a multinational Peace Monitoring Group. The Autonomous Bougainville Government was formally established in 2005. Bougainvilleans voted in favor of independence in a 2019 referendum. The PNG parliament is set to vote in 2023 on whether to approve independence for Bougainville.

Issues for Congress

Members of the 118th Congress may consider oversight questions related to PNG. These include how the U.S.-PNG DCA supports the Indo-Pacific Strategy and U.S. military force posture and planning in the region, how U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific have responded to the agreement, how U.S. policy toward PNG fits into overall Pacific Islands policy as outlined in the 2022 U.S. Pacific Partnership Strategy, and how U.S. assistance may support economic and political development in PNG and counter China’s influence.

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