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Papua New Guinea: Issues of external and internal security

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Australia and Papua New Guinea have long been linked by geographical proximity and by colonial history. Security concerns were a major element of Australia's early interest in the island of New Guinea and these concerns were reinforced by the Japanese invasion and occupation of New Guinea in 1942–1945 and Indonesian expansionism in the 1960s.¹

Security issues are still an important element in relations between the two countries, but the interests of the two countries do not necessarily coincide and security priorities are subject to the changing external and internal environments in which the two countries operate. Maintenance of good relations requires continuous review of the issues and their relevance to the respective players.

Papua New Guinea's transition to independence

In 1951 the Australian colonial administration revived the Pacific Islands Regiment (PIR), which had been formed in Papua New Guinea during World War II, but until 1964 the PIR formed part of the Australian

1 For a detailed, recent account of this subject see Hunt (2017).

Army's Northern Command, whose headquarters were in Brisbane. Subsequently, headquarters were shifted to Port Moresby, though most of the PIR's officers were Australian and orders came from Canberra.

With the approach of independence, in the early 1970s there was debate about whether an independent Papua New Guinea should have a defence force—some commentators both within and outside Papua New Guinea seeing a well-organised defence force as a potential threat to the emerging democratic state. In the event, the PIR formed the core of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF), which was established in 1973, and just before independence in 1975 defence powers were transferred from Australia to Papua New Guinea and a Papua New Guinean, Brigadier-General Ted Diro, became commanding officer of the force (Sinclair 1992; May 1993:Chapter 3).

At independence, Papua New Guinea clearly expected a defence treaty with Australia (May 1993:36), but this was not forthcoming; instead in an exchange of letters and a joint statement in 1977 the two countries affirmed that their governments 'attached high importance to continuing the close co-operation between their two countries in defence matters' and declared their intent 'to consult ... about matters affecting their common security interests'. Australia also undertook to provide continuing assistance to the PNGDF through its Defence Cooperation Program.

Papua New Guinea's foreign policy at independence was one of 'universalism': 'friend to all, and enemy to none'. Subsequently this was modified to a policy of 'active and selective engagement', to which was added the elaboration of 'look North [to Asia] and work the Pacific'.² Central to the latter has been Papua New Guinea's prominent role in the Pacific Islands Forum and the Melanesian Spearhead Group.

Papua New Guinea's external security environment

Papua New Guinea has continued to enjoy a generally benign external security environment, though not without some challenges. The principal issues for Papua New Guinea's external security have been in three main

2 For an overview of foreign policymaking in Papua New Guinea see Wolfers and Dihm (2009). A review of foreign policy, tabled in the Papua New Guinea national parliament in 1981, is reproduced in *Papua New Guinea Foreign Affairs Review* vol. 1, no. 4 (1982).

areas: the border with Indonesia to the west, the border with Solomon Islands to the east, and incursions by foreign fishing vessels in Papua New Guinea's territorial waters.

The border with Indonesia

Papua New Guinea shares a border with the Indonesian provinces of West Papua and Papua (formerly the single province of Irian Jaya), in which Papuan nationalists, led by the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM, Free Papua Movement) and more recently the Komite Nasional Papua Barat (KNPB, West Papua National Committee), have maintained a continuing campaign for West Papuan separatism and a review of the 1969 so-called 'Act of Free Choice' (in fact, an act free of choice, conducted in the presence of a United Nations special representative), by which West Papua moved from a United Nations Temporary Executive Authority to incorporation within the Indonesian Republic (see, for example, Ondawame 2010 and Saltford 2002).

In the early 1970s there was significant sympathy among Papua New Guinea's emerging leaders for the separatist ambitions of their Melanesian brothers in the former Dutch territory, but Papua New Guinea recognised Indonesian sovereignty in West Papua after 1969 (as did Australia) and within its capacity sought to deny the OPM access to Papua New Guinea. OPM camps were set up in the dense jungle on Papua New Guinea's side of the border, however, and this was a source of some tension in relations between Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. Regular crack-downs on West Papuan groups by Indonesia led to frequent border crossings by OPM supporters and ordinary villagers, and occasional incursions by Indonesian soldiers. In 1984 some 10,000 border crossers sought refuge in Papua New Guinea after the Indonesia military acted against Papuan nationalists who had sought to raise the West Papuan flag, and made unauthorised border incursions in pursuit of alleged OPM supporters who sought refuge in Papua New Guinea. In an escalation of tensions, Papua New Guinea took its grievances to the United Nations General Assembly.

By the late 1980s relations between the two countries had improved and the two had signed a Treaty of Mutual Respect, Friendship and Cooperation (May 1987), but the border remains a continuing irritant in Papua New Guinea – Indonesia relations. West Papuan separatism has not gone away, and the erosion of concessions made by the Indonesian government to West Papuans after the demise of President Suharto,

continued immigration from other parts of Indonesia, and sustained military repression and human rights abuses in West Papua, have fuelled Papuan nationalist sentiments and separatist demands and created a vicious cycle of repression and confrontation. Papua New Guinea has resisted Indonesian proposals for joint border patrols and with the PNGDF's capacity to patrol the border limited by its resources, the potential for future border 'incidents' is high (see, for example, Chauvel 2004; King 2004; ICG 2010a, 2010b; May 2021).

The border with Solomon Islands

In the east, a somewhat arbitrary colonial boundary separates Papua New Guinea from Solomon Islands, though there has been continuing traditional movement across the island chain. During the Bougainville rebellion (see below), members of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army regularly crossed into Solomon Islands—for some time with the effective blessing of the Solomon Islands government—to escape the PNGDF, and weapons and medicines were imported into Bougainville through Solomon Islands. In a mirror image of what was happening on Papua New Guinea's western border, on more than one occasion PNGDF soldiers crossed illegally into Solomon Islands (in one instance attempting to annex a small island in Solomon Islands territory), drawing complaints from successive Solomon Islands governments.

Since the end of the Bougainville conflict, this issue has largely disappeared, though a reported continuing flow of weapons into Papua New Guinea through Solomon Islands still poses security concerns.

Illegal fishing

The operation of illegal foreign fishing vessels in Papua New Guinea waters, particularly in the 'Dogleg' area to the west of the Papuan Gulf, has been a serious issue for Papua New Guinea, especially given its limited capacity to monitor, let alone control, what is going on in its extensive territorial waters. Some attempts have been made to address the problems of illegal fishing on a regional basis through the Forum Fisheries Agency and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, and Australia has supported the efforts of Papua New Guinea and other Pacific island states to improve their maritime security and protect their fisheries through the Pacific Patrol Boat Program and assistance in aerial surveillance.

Other concerns

In addition to these concerns, in more recent years a range of non-traditional security concerns has emerged—though arguably the issues identified have been mostly of greater relevance to Papua New Guinea's allies, particularly Australia, than to Papua New Guinea itself.

Following 9/11 2001, international terrorism has been added to the list of external security threats, and, largely at the urging of Australia (which has provided some logistic assistance) and the United States, measures have been taken to upgrade maritime and airport security. While the threat of a terrorist strike cannot be entirely dismissed, the likelihood of terrorist activity in Papua New Guinea is slight: there are no terrorist groups in Papua New Guinea and no obvious constituency for them (there is a small group of foreign Muslims and Papua New Guinean converts, but the group has no apparent radical tendencies; Flower 2010) and in the small-scale nature of Papua New Guinea society, the activities of outsiders (and indeed of Papua New Guineans) tend to attract close scrutiny from neighbours, which would make terrorist activities difficult to sustain.³

For similar reasons, and given fairly tight border security, people smuggling, though sometimes listed as a security concern, is not a major issue for Papua New Guinea. Apart from the border crossers from West Papua, mentioned above, there has been some illegal migration to Papua New Guinea, in some cases of people (mistakenly) perceiving Papua New Guinea as an easy entry route to Australia; there has even been at least one boatload of prospective refugees who unintentionally made landfall in Papua New Guinea en route to Australia. And there has been a steady stream of illegal migrants from China. Some of this illegal migration (and some legal issuing of Papua New Guinea passports) seems to have been facilitated by corrupt officials in overseas diplomatic posts and in one disturbing incident the machine used to print Papua New Guinea passports was stolen. But stringent visa conditions, closer oversight of officials working overseas, and occasional raids to round up foreigners working without work permits (especially those working in occupations reserved for Papua New Guineans) have kept the number of unwanted foreigners within limits.⁴

3 For an interesting comparative critique of the 'terrorist threat' (to Australia) see Michaelsen (2012).

4 A report in *Islands Business*, July 2012, however, suggests that 'between 15,000 and 20,000 foreigners, mostly Asian, are believed to be residing and working in Papua New Guinea'.

Perhaps more serious are reports of Papua New Guinean links to international crime.⁵ From time to time there have been reports of ‘Chinese triads’ operating in the country and of a trade in drugs (marijuana) for guns across the Torres Strait border. Coupled with the reality of *raskol* gangs in Papua New Guinea (see below) and corruption within the public sector (including the police), these reports must be taken seriously, but the evidence of such activities is still modest. For most Papua New Guineans, vulnerability to the activities of foreign ‘carpet baggers’ and scam merchants, for example in forestry and in pyramid finance schemes, may be cause for greater concern.

For Australia, with its relative abundance of resources to address the issues, these non-traditional security threats occupy the minds of security planners. But for Papua New Guinea, external security threats, both traditional and non-traditional, are substantially outweighed by the challenges it faces with respect to internal security.

Internal security

Before European contact, ‘tribal’ fighting between Papua New Guinea’s fragmented local groups was endemic across much of the country. Under the colonial administration intergroup fighting diminished, but it continued, especially in the highlands where the Australian administrative presence was not well established until the 1960s. ‘Law and order’ problems were still a major issue in the years preceding independence in 1975, and were probably exacerbated by forces set in train by the process of ‘modernisation’: increased competition for land due to the introduction of cash crops and a rapid increase in population, the impact of large-scale resource projects, the breakdown of traditional authority structures at the local level, intense competition for electoral office (in 2002 ‘failed elections’ were declared in six of the country’s electorates as a result of election-related intergroup fighting in Southern Highlands Province), and the introduction of motor vehicles (and hence motor vehicle accidents) and alcohol. Over the past two decades there has been a marked increase in the use of automatic weapons in intergroup fighting and in general criminality.

5 A range of pertinent issues is addressed in Boeha and McFarlane (2000).

There are several dimensions to the law and order problem.⁶

Intergroup or ‘tribal’ fighting has deep historical and cultural roots, including mechanisms for at least temporary peace and reconciliation, but has evolved in new forms with the introduction of guns and the interplay of traditional rivalries and electoral competition.

Raskolism—essentially, criminal gangs—began to emerge both in towns and in rural areas in the 1970s largely among unemployed youth (especially in urban squatter settlements) and often based on localised ethnic group affiliation. Over time, *raskol* gangs have tended to become more heterogeneous, more sophisticated and probably more likely to be associated with prominent local political figures (for whom the term ‘warlord’ has come into common usage). The predatory behaviour of *raskols* in some rural areas, especially in the highlands, has curtailed economic activities such as coffee buying and led to the closure of banks and other businesses (for example, see Haley and May 2007:Chapter 1).

Within communities, violence against women is also a widespread problem.⁷ Apart from the personal and communal costs of domestic violence, this helps explain the level of political participation by women in Papua New Guinea, which is one of the lowest in the region. To the extent that violence against women has made some parents reluctant to send their daughters to school, it also has far-reaching longer-term implications for the status of women.

Threats to resource projects, from disgruntled landowners and others impacted by mining or other resource-exploiting operations, have become another aspect of the law and order problem. The outstanding case here is Bougainville,⁸ where what began essentially as a protest movement among the younger generation of landowners in the area adjacent to the Bougainville gold and copper mine escalated into a declaration of independence and a virtual civil war that lasted for over a decade, cost numerous lives and closed the mine, which at the time contributed around 40 per cent of Papua New Guinea’s exports and 17 per cent of its government revenue. Bougainville may be an extreme instance of the power that landowners can exercise over a big resource project, but

6 For early reviews of the law and order issue see Committee to Review Policy and Administration on Crime, Law and Order (1983) and Clifford et al. (1984). A more recent analysis is by Dinnen (2001).

7 For an overview of the subject see Amnesty International (2006).

8 For a comprehensive account of the Bougainville conflict and peace process see Regan (2010).

virtually all of Papua New Guinea's mining, gas and petroleum projects have run into confrontation with landowner groups, whose expectations of the benefits to be gained from such projects are often unrealistic and for whom formal agreements are infinitely negotiable.

Increased migration from Asia, especially illegal migration from China, and the expansion of Asian business interests have produced sporadic outbursts of 'anti-Chinese' sentiment, including protests against the largely Chinese-owned Ramu nickel mine and occasional attacks on 'Chinese' businesses. Though not on the scale witnessed in Solomon Islands in 2006, the potential exists for anti-Asian riots (Smith 2012).

Numerous measures have been taken to deal with law and order problems, from the passage of the *Inter-Group Fighting Act* in 1977, the creation of police mobile squads and the call-out of the PNGDF in states of emergency, to the creation of village court magistrates and provincial peace and good order committees. The PNGDF was first called out to assist police following the declaration of a state of emergency in response to rising urban crime in the national capital, Port Moresby in 1984. It was involved in several further operations with police during the 1980s and 1990s, including its heavy commitment to the Bougainville conflict. More recently the two disciplined forces collaborated during a state of emergency in Southern Highlands in 2006–2007. But fundamental problems remain.

A continuing issue in dealing with the problems of law and order is the capacity of the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary (RPNGC). Faced with daunting tasks of policing, the RPNGC is under-resourced in terms of pay, housing and transportation.⁹ Police morale is generally low, and in recent times the RPNGC has been factionalised and politicised at senior levels. In 2002, when 'failed elections' were declared in six Southern Highlands electorates, the provincial police commander complained that his officers could not contain the violence because they were not only outnumbered but outgunned. Not surprisingly, under these conditions, police—especially the police mobile squads—have been frequently accused of human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch 2007) and the state has paid out substantial amounts of compensation for police actions in which property has been destroyed and civilians abused.

9 See Dinnen (2001:53–54). Dinnen notes that in 1975, when crime rates were relatively low, the ratio of police to population was 1:476; by the late 1990s, with rising crime rates, the ratio had fallen to 1:800; current estimates place the ratio at around 1:1,400.

With regard to the PNGDF, the post-independence military coup predicted by many in the early 1970s has not materialised, though there has been a number of relatively minor confrontations between the PNGDF and the government. These have included the ‘Sandline Affair’, in which the PNGDF commander intervened to abort a covert operation by the government in 1997 to use ‘military consultants’, in conjunction with the PNGDF, in an attempt to end the Bougainville conflict (Dinnen et al. 1997; Dorney 1998; O’Callaghan 1999); a mutiny at Moem Barracks in Wewak, where soldiers briefly occupied the barracks and destroyed some buildings in protest against conditions of service and proposals to downsize the force (May 2003a); and a recent (January 2012) short-lived mutiny by a group of soldiers supported by Sir Michael Somare to press for acceptance of a Supreme Court ruling in Somare’s favour during the political impasse that followed the parliamentary ousting of Somare as prime minister in 2011 (see Chapter 13). I have argued elsewhere that a military coup seems unlikely in Papua New Guinea, but the possibility of a coalition of disgruntled soldiers and opportunistic politicians challenging government decisions cannot be ruled out (May 2003a:6).

Deterioration in government service delivery also poses security risks for Papua New Guinea’s citizens. Apart from a high incidence of HIV/AIDS (Cullen 2006; Butt and Eves 2008), the poor state of Papua New Guinea’s health system has resulted in recent outbreaks of cholera and tuberculosis (leading to an influx of people from Papua New Guinea’s Western Province into Australia’s Torres Strait islands seeking treatment), and poor performance on most health indicators. A poorly performing health sector leaves the country vulnerable to imported viruses. Human health issues, and the potential spread of plant and animal diseases, pose external threats to Australia, which have been addressed in part by regular consultation between health and quarantine officials from the two countries.

Papua New Guinea’s geography and weather patterns raise further security risks in terms of susceptibility to earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, floods, mudslides and droughts, and the longer-term effects of climate change. The Carteret Islanders in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville are already reportedly threatened by rising sea levels and likely to become among the world’s first ‘climate change refugees’. Papua New Guinea’s capacity to respond to such natural disasters is limited.

The challenges ahead

Papua New Guinea is commonly perceived as politically unstable, even though to the end of July 2012 the country had had only six prime ministers in 37 years, elections had been held regularly on schedule, and all changes of government had followed constitutional procedures. All governments to date, however, have been coalitions (since 2002, sometimes coalitions of more than 10 parties), coalitions have been unstable, and up to 2002 no government had survived a full parliamentary term (most losing office as a result of a vote of no confidence against the prime minister). In 2001 the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) sought to create greater political stability by strengthening parties and providing sanctions against MPs who switched parties. Subsequently, the government of Sir Michael Somare (2002–2007) became the first to survive a full parliamentary term, though this owed less to the provisions of the OLIPPAC (which in 2003 proved to be largely ineffective in maintaining party cohesion; May and Anere 2011) than to the Somare coalition's large majority, which it used to avoid votes of no confidence by adjourning parliament and controlling parliamentary procedures.

Somare was re-elected as prime minister in 2007, heading another larger coalition, but tensions soon appeared within the coalition. Then in July 2010 the Supreme Court ruled against certain provisions of the OLIPPAC, leaving the way open for renewed 'party hopping'. Several coalition MPs crossed the floor.

In August 2011, while Somare was in Singapore receiving medical attention, the parliament, ignoring constitutional requirements, declared that the prime ministership was vacant and elected Peter O'Neill to replace Somare. The parliament's actions were challenged and in December 2011 the Supreme Court upheld the challenge, but O'Neill and his supporters (who formed a clear majority of the parliament) chose to ignore the court—having already attempted to block the challenge and dismiss the chief justice. From August 2011 to June 2012 this political impasse continued, though the public service and (after an initial division) the police fell into line behind O'Neill (see Chapter 13).

A scheduled national election in June 2012 promised a way out of the impasse, but in early 2012 attempts by O'Neill's erratic deputy prime minister, Belden Namah, to postpone the election, and an ambivalent

reaction by O'Neill, threatened to create a serious constitutional crisis. In the event, the Electoral Commission refused to back down from commitment to the election and with over 3,500 candidates having paid their candidate's fees and out campaigning there was no stopping the electoral process.

By late July results had been declared in nearly all electorates and it was apparent that O'Neill, as leader of the party with the largest number of seats, would be invited to form government. On 2 August 2012, a year after his controversial political coup against Somare, O'Neill was duly elected prime minister, heading another large coalition. In a particularly Papua New Guinean turn of events, Somare—who before the election had promised, if elected, to put O'Neill and his supporters behind bars—joined O'Neill as a coalition partner, and Namah, who had fallen out with O'Neill during the election, headed a small parliamentary opposition group.

Once again, Papua New Guinea has come back from the brink of what appeared to be a serious constitutional crisis, though it remains to be seen, first, whether permanent damage has been done to the relationship between the legislature and the judiciary and, second, whether the O'Neill-led coalition will prove stable or will give way to another period of what Papua New Guineans have referred to as '*yo-yo politik*'.

Achieving good governance will be particularly important on two counts. A major liquefied natural gas (LNG) project, based in Southern Highlands and expected to come on stream in 2014 and to produce revenue flows to government in 2018, is expected to double the size Papua New Guinea's GDP and fund a substantial rise in the provision of government services (ACIL Tasman 2009). Expectations are high, as is the potential for landowner discontent. Successful management of the prospective benefits of the LNG project will call for good governance. Second, under the terms of the Bougainville Agreement of 2001 that marked the end of the Bougainville conflict, a referendum on the future status of Bougainville—to include the option of independence—is to be held within the period 2015–2020. Whether Bougainvilleans decide to maintain their present autonomy or vote for independence may be determined largely by relations between the national government and Bougainville over the next few years. And if Bougainville decides to separate, it remains to be seen if the rest of Papua New Guinea will accept the decision. [In December 2019, in a non-binding referendum, Bougainvilleans voted by 98 per cent

for full independence from Papua New Guinea. Negotiations between the Government of Papua New Guinea and the Autonomous Bougainville Government over the outcome of the referendum began in early 2021.]

Implications for Australia

Relations between Australia and Papua New Guinea since the latter's independence have been generally good. But the relationship is not symmetrical and there is always likely to be some resentment on Papua New Guinea's part of Australia's colonial past and its continuing role in Pacific affairs. Many Papua New Guineans perceive Australia as attempting to exert influence over Papua New Guinea and other Pacific island states (and over the Pacific Islands Forum and Melanesian Spearhead Group), and see Australia's substantial development assistance as 'boomerang aid' that benefits Australians more than it benefits Papua New Guinea. The chairman of Papua New Guinea's anti-corruption Taskforce Sweep has also described Australia as a 'Cayman Islands' in relation to the laundering and housing of proceeds of corruption in Papua New Guinea.¹⁰ These attitudes partly account for the 'Look North' emphasis in Papua New Guinea's foreign policy, and the fostering of closer relations with China, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Following on from the exchange of letters in 1977, Papua New Guinea and Australia signed a Joint Declaration of Principles Guiding Relations between Papua New Guinea and Australia in 1987. The declaration reaffirmed the basic elements of the security relationship, though Papua New Guinea's prime minister at the time, Paias Wingti, saw it as 'an improvement' on the 1977 undertaking, and his defence secretary described it as 'an effective guarantee of Australian commitment', saying, 'Papua New Guinea considers Australia as a security guarantor in the event of uncertainty and threats' (May 1993:36). Subsequently, following reviews by Papua New Guinea of its security needs and by Australia of its security assistance programs with Papua New Guinea, an Agreed Statement on Security Cooperation was signed by Australia's Prime Minister Bob Hawke and Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister Rabbie Namaliu in 1991. A significant feature of this document was the agreement that 'internal security needs are to be given the highest priority'.

10 Speech by Sam Koim to AUSTRAC Major Reporters Meeting, Sydney, 4 October 2012.

Security relations between Australia and Papua New Guinea were again reviewed as part of a wider examination of Australia's relations with the Pacific island states by the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade in 2003¹¹ and 2009.¹² Both reports identified issues of concern—including threats from terrorism and transnational crime, border management capability (and specifically the porous nature of the border with Indonesia), and internal security issues, including vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change, outlined programs already in place to address common security concerns and made recommendations for further action.

Apart from the Defence Cooperation Program, Australia has supported a variety of joint initiatives, bilateral and regional, to support the law and justice sector, improve Papua New Guinea's border management and enforcement capabilities, combat transnational crime, and improve the country's capacity to respond to natural disasters. An Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP) was launched in 2004 and involved some 60 public servants and 210 police from Australia to serve in line positions in Papua New Guinea at a cost of A\$1.1 billion over five years. However, the ECP had a mixed reception and was largely abandoned when the Papua New Guinea Supreme Court ruled against the enabling Papua New Guinea legislation; the Australian police contingent and some public servants were subsequently withdrawn.

Australia's development assistance and defence cooperation support for Papua New Guinea are likely to remain significant for both countries. Australia's bilateral aid program to Papua New Guinea, at A\$492 million in 2012–2013 is its second largest, behind Indonesia, and is Papua New Guinea's largest source of overseas development assistance; Papua New Guinea is the largest component (A\$21 million in 2012–2013) in Australia's Defence Cooperation Program. But this does not buy Australia more than a very limited, and changeable, influence over Papua New Guinea's security policies.

Relations between Papua New Guinea and Australia reached something of a nadir during an interventionist phase in the latter stages of the Howard government (Fry and Kabutaulaka 2008), but in March 2008

11 Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, *A Pacific Engaged: Australia's Relations with Papua New Guinea and the Island States of the South-West Pacific* (Canberra 2003).

12 Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, *Economic and Security Challenges Facing Papua New Guinea and the Island States of the Southwest Pacific* (Canberra 2009).

Australia's incoming prime minister, Kevin Rudd, and Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Somare co-signed a 'Port Moresby Declaration' that set down Australia's commitment to a new era of cooperation with the Pacific island nations. The following month at an Australia – Papua New Guinea ministerial forum Papua New Guinea's foreign minister welcomed the 'rebirth' of relations between the two countries and, in a joint statement, the two countries committed to negotiations on a new bilateral Partnership for Development to achieve improved development outcomes in Papua New Guinea. The ECP was subsequently revived, as the Strongim Gavman program, which was a somewhat less ambitious assistance package, and a renewed policing partnership between the Australian Federal Police and the RPNGC was endorsed. Other important recent initiatives have included the creation of a bilateral Health Issues Committee and a Papua New Guinea – Australia Forest Carbon Partnership.¹³

Australia's relations with the incoming government of Peter O'Neill are likely to remain sound, but, as always, maintaining good relations will require sensitivity on Australia's part. As ABC journalist Sean Dorney (1998:338) once said: 'one of the biggest problems Australia has in dealing with Papua New Guinea ... [is that] too many Australians who know too little about the country tend to believe they have the solutions for Papua New Guinea's problems'. Moreover, with the growing influence of China, and to a lesser extent Indonesia and Malaysia, and the changing dynamics of the Pacific Islands Forum and Melanesian Spearhead Group (May 2011), the context in which Australia conducts its relations with Papua New Guinea has become more complex.

To maintain good relations, Australia must improve its understanding of Papua New Guinea, through closer government-to-government and people-to-people relations, and resist the temptation to act as though it knows what is best for Papua New Guineans. For its part, Papua New Guinea must lift its standard of governance and demonstrate to Australian taxpayers that Australia's development assistance is being well used.

13 For some reflections on Australia – Papua New Guinea relations in this period see May (2008).

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