



By: TA | AP Insight

Australia and Papua New Guinea to sign defense pact as China's influence grows



Australia and Papua New Guinea's defense forces will be integrated under a new security pact that will be signed this week, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said on Monday, as his government attempts to curb China's security **influence** in the region.

Albanese said he and his Papua New Guinean counterpart, James Marape, will sign the pact on Wednesday, a day after celebrating the South Pacific island nation's 50th anniversary of independence from Australia.

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau will also be in the Papua New Guinea capital, Port Moresby, for the celebrations.

"It is a very significant upgrade in our defense relationship," Albanese told Australian Broadcasting Corp. in Perth in Western Australia state before flying to Australia's nearest neighbor.

"It provides for mutual defense, which means that we will provide support for each other, provide for an integration of our interoperability of our assets and our respective defense forces," Albanese added.

With an estimated population of almost 12 million people, Papua New Guinea is the most populous nation in the South Pacific after Australia. Australia has 27 million people.

China's growing sway

The deal will allow the nations' citizens to serve in either militaries. Australia would offer Australian citizenship as an incentive for Papua New Guineans to enlist in the Australian military.

Australia currently only accept recruits from its Five Eyes intelligence-sharing **partners**, including the United States, Britain, Canada and New Zealand.

Three Pacific island nations have changed their allegiances from Taiwan to Beijing since 2019 as China's influence in the region has grown.

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The U.S. and its allies are particularly concerned by China's growing sway in security through police training in Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Australia and Papua New Guinea signed a security **agreement** in 2023 that broadened the two nations' defense cooperation and strengthened Australia's place as the preferred security partner in a region.

The signing was delayed by six months after a separate security deal struck between the United States and Marape's government sparked protests in Papua New Guinea in May 2023 over concerns that the U.S. pact undermined national sovereignty.

A transformational agreement

Oliver Nobetau, project director of the Australia-Papua New Guinea Network at the Sydney-based Lowy Institute international policy think tank, said any wording around "exclusivity" of the partnership in the new Australia-Papua New Guinea pact would be significant.

Several Pacific island nations avoid taking sides in the growing strategic competition between U.S. allies and China.



Australia would continue to discuss with Fiji and Tonga advancing bilateral defense cooperation - Anthony

Albanese

“If there’s any wording around Australia being the security partner of choice for a country like Papua New Guinea, that would be a big win” for Australia, Nobetau said.

“We know that Pacific countries, PNG in particular, have been quite adamant about protecting their sovereignty, which means removing the sort of language that excludes third-party partnerships,” he added.

Albanese had hoped to sign a security and economic **treaty** with Vanuatu last week.

But concerns within that island nation’s government about how the deal could impact its ability to secure infrastructure funding from China has extended negotiations.

Australian Defense Minister Richard Marles said the new bilateral treaty would replace an agreement struck in 1977 with a newly independent Papua New Guinea.

“This is a transformational agreement between ourselves and PNG,” Marles said.

Australia would continue to discuss with Fiji and Tonga advancing bilateral defense cooperation, Marles said.