



THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE

The Papua New Guinea – Australia Mutual Defence Treaty (the Pukpuk Treaty): A blank cheque Australia might not be able to pay

Professor Joanne Wallis

Professor of International Security

School of Social Sciences



**make
history.**

The Papua New Guinea-Australia Mutual Defence Treaty: a blank cheque Australia might not be able to pay

In a climate of heightened strategic competition between China, on the one hand, and Australia's ally, the United States, on the other, the Papua New Guinea-Australia Mutual Defence Treaty (hereafter the Pukpuk Treaty) seems like a "win" for the Australian Government.

On its face, the Pukpuk Treaty locks Papua New Guinea (PNG) into Australia's strategic orbit, as it deepens the two countries' defence cooperation by creating a military alliance between them, and it gives Australian forces greater access to PNG's defence and other facilities. This meets the Australian Government's goal of remaining the primary security partner of Pacific Island countries, and more importantly, of denying China a potential security foothold in PNG.¹

Papua New Guinea matters to Australia

Given its proximity to Australia, particularly to our northern approaches, PNG has always been a strategic concern for Australia. This is why Australia, and before Federation, its colonies, was so keen to acquire colonial control of PNG. TB Millar, one of the architects of modern Australian strategic policy, went so far as to observe in 1965 that:

*if the whole island [of Papua New Guinea] were to sink under the sea, the net result for Australia in terms of military strategy would be a gain. It is an exposed and vulnerable front door.*²

Millar's observation captured the importance of PNG's strategic geography for Australia, which had been illustrated during the First and Second World Wars: it is a very large and proximate stepping stone to Australia.

The flipside is that PNG is also well-located for Australian forward-basing. This is why Australia, alongside the PNG and United States Governments, recently redeveloped the Lombrum Naval Base on the strategic choke point of Manus Island. It is also why the United States sought a Defence Cooperation Agreement with PNG in 2023 to gain access to potential bases in the country.

But Australian Governments have long been reluctant to offer PNG a security guarantee

Since its independence from Australian colonisation in 1975, PNG has sought a binding security guarantee from Australia, as its governments have recognised that they lack the capacity to secure their borders, maritime territory, and guarantee internal security.

In 1977 Australia and PNG agreed to a formal defence relationship,³ but this did not provide an Australian commitment to defend PNG. It also did not provide a guarantee that Australia would assist with the growing array of domestic security challenges in PNG, including tribal violence in the Highlands, crime in Port Moresby and other urban centres, and the secessionist movement in Bougainville.⁴

¹ This submission draws on: Joanne Wallis, *Pacific Power? Australia's Strategy in the Pacific Islands* (Melbourne University Press 2017); Rebecca Strating and Joanne Wallis, *Girt by Sea: Re-imagining Australia's Security* (La Trobe University Press, 2024); Joanne Wallis, 'Australia's statecraft towards its 'Pacific family'', in Joanne Wallis, et al. (eds.), *Power and Influence in the Pacific Islands: Understanding Statecraftiness* (Routledge, 2004), pp. 123-139; and Joanne Wallis, 'A defence treaty with PNG might seem like a 'win' for Australia. But there are 4 crucial questions to answer', *The Conversation*, 20 February 2025, <https://theconversation.com/a-defence-treaty-with-png-might-seem-like-a-win-for-australia-but-there-are-4-crucial-questions-to-answer-250396>.

² T.B. Millar, *Australia's Defence* (Melbourne University Press, 1969).

³ Malcolm Fraser, 'Joint Statement by the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea on the Defence Relationship Between Papua New Guinea and Australia,' *Australian Foreign Affairs Record* 17, no.2 (Australian Government Publishing Service 1977), 90-91.

⁴ Donald Denoon, *A Trial Separation: Australia and the Decolonisation of Papua New Guinea* (Pandanus Books, 2005); Hank Nelson, *Fighting for Her Gates and Waterways: Changing Perceptions of New Guinea in Australian Defence, State Society and Governance in Melanesia Working Paper no. 2007/1* (ANU 2007).

In 1985, after Australia unilaterally reduced its aid program in PNG, the PNG Government requested a stronger defence commitment than that contained in the 1977 joint statement.⁵ Defence Minister Kim Beazley was conscious that PNG was ‘right in the frame of our [Australia’s] relationship with Indonesia’, owing to their shared border and the challenge of West Papuan independence activists crossing it.⁶ Therefore, Beazley was cautious about the extent of that security guarantee, to avoid encouraging PNG to be reckless in its behaviour along its border with Indonesia, a view shared by Foreign Minister Bill Hayden.⁷

However, reflecting the adoption of the ‘Defence of Australia’ doctrine in the 1987 Defence White Paper, Australia committed to promote stability and security in its near region, including the Pacific Islands.⁸ Indeed, the white paper recognised that the Pacific Islands region was the ‘most likely route through which any major assault could be launched against Australia’ and indicated that the USSR’s presence in the region could inhibit freedom of movement through Australian approaches and threaten supply lines to the US.⁹

So, although Australia was reluctant to provide a stronger formal defence commitment to PNG, as a compromise, the 1987 Joint Declaration of Principles, provided that:

The two Governments will consult, at the request of either, about matters affecting their common security interests. In the event of external armed attack threatening the national sovereignty of either country, such consultation would be conducted for the purpose of each Government deciding what measures should be taken, jointly or separately, in relation to that attack.¹⁰

This language was important, as by focusing on external attacks, it gave Australia a plausible excuse not to become involved in the developing secessionist crisis in Bougainville. It also, again, did not provide a binding defence guarantee.

The Committee needs to be clear that the justifications for the Pukpuk Treaty outweigh the potential costs

Australia has legitimate strategic concerns about China’s increasingly visible presence in the Pacific Islands region and its increasingly provocative activities in the broader Indo-Pacific. For the reasons given, PNG is strategically important to Australia, and it is understandable that the Australian Government wants to try to shore up its security relationship with PNG to the exclusion of China. But the Committee, and the Parliament, need to be satisfied that the risk of China establishing a military presence in PNG is sufficiently great that it outweighs the potential costs of the Pukpuk Treaty.

Any Chinese base in the Pacific Islands region, particularly in PNG, given its proximity to Australia, would be extremely vulnerable – if there is a conflict with China it would be the first thing that Australia would target, as China would know. It would also likely be unpopular in PNG, supply and logistics would be difficult and expensive for China, and its strategic value to China is questionable – it would make Australia feel vulnerable, but China can achieve the same aim at far lower cost and risk by, for example, periodically sending its warships to circumnavigate Australia.

⁵ Interview with Hugh White, 5 April 2016, in Wallis, *Pacific Power?*

⁶ Interview with Kim Beazley, 20 April 2016 in Wallis, *Pacific Power?*

⁷ Interview with Kim Beazley, 20 April 2016 in Wallis, *Pacific Power?*; Niki Raath, *Moral Support? Australia’s Response to Papua New Guinea’s Internal Security Problems* (Parliamentary Research Service, 1991).

⁸ Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia* (Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987).

⁹ Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia*, 15.

¹⁰ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, ‘*Joint Declaration of Principles Guiding Relations Between Australia and Papua New Guinea*’, 9 December 1987, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/papua-new-guinea/australia-papua-new-guinea-historic-documents/joint-declaration-of-principles-guiding-relations-between-australia-and-papua-new-guinea>.

A military alliance puts Australia at the mercy of PNG's foreign policy decisions

A military alliance of the type created by the Pukpuk Treaty imposes obligations on the allied countries. These obligations can be:

- Those formally provided for in the treaty text; and
- Those informally generated either by (a) assumptions about allies' willingness to support each other; or (b) by allies perceiving that they need to demonstrate their reliability.

This is why Australia has supported almost every United States' war since the 1951 Australia, New Zealand and United States Security (ANZUS) Treaty was signed, regardless of whether it was required to do so under the terms of that treaty. Australian Governments have calculated that they needed to make these 'payments' on their alliance 'insurance policy'.

This is important for the Pukpuk Treaty. Not only has Australia undertaken to defend PNG, but we may also come under pressure to support other PNG foreign policy decisions that fall outside the treaty, but which PNG expects us to support and which we calculate that we must support to maintain our perceived reliability as an ally.

The Committee needs to have a good understanding of how the PNG Government works and how its decisions are made. PNG is a democracy, as its government changes at elections, and it has a robust court system, but its democratic functioning is under constant pressure. Very few women have ever been elected to PNG's Parliament, corruption allegations are widespread, and high levels of illiteracy and poverty hamper popular participation in democratic decision-making.¹¹

There are several challenges that may test Australia's alliance commitments

The self-determination struggle in West Papua continues and PNG currently has defence units posted on its land border with Indonesia. The Australian Government needs to be clear with PNG, Indonesia, and most importantly, the Australian public, about the circumstances in which it might provide military support to PNG if violence on the shared border with Indonesia worsens. This could bring Australian personnel into direct contact with their Indonesian counterparts – something Australia has been at pains to avoid for decades, as demonstrated during the 1999 InterFET mission in Timor-Leste.

Allies can entrap each other into military actions they would not choose

This is a reminder that defence alliances can entrap allies into military actions that they would not normally choose to be involved in.

Australia has been entrapped into military action by PNG before. In 1980 Australia was dragged into the response to the Santo Rebellion that occurred during Vanuatu's transition to independence. In the lead-up to independence, the indigenous secessionist Nagriamel Movement occupied the town of Luganville on Espiritu Santo and made a unilateral declaration of independence. The Prime Minister-elect, Father Walter Lini, requested help from members of the South Pacific Forum (now Pacific Islands Forum). The PNG Defence Force commander, Brigadier General Ted Diro, persuaded PNG Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan to agree to deploy the PNG Defence Force to put down the rebellion. Australia was initially reluctant to provide materiel support and decided to pressure Britain, which was still responsible for security in the territory, to respond. However, PNG

¹¹ For recent analyses of PNG's political system see: Michael Kabuni, 'Refereeing democracy: judiciary, parliament and executive in 50 years of Papua New Guinea politics', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (2025) <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2025.2593390>; Henry Ivarature, 'Ministerial durations in Papua New Guinea: 1972-2022', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (2025) <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2025.2589359>; Mary Fairio, 'A fifty (50) years reflections on women in politics in Papua New Guinea', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (2025) <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2025.2589358>; Michael Kabuni, 'Anti-corruption efforts in Papua New Guinea: a brief 50-year overview', *The Round Table* (2025) 114(4): 496-499; Ronald May, 'Political and social development in Papua New Guinea', *The Round Table* (2025) 114(4): 481-484.

effectively forced Australia to provide support by deploying Operation Wantok Durua on 7 August 1980. The PNG Defence Force deployment consisted of a 300-strong light infantry contingent, supported by two Australian-donated vessels and aircraft.¹² As Australians were still serving in the PNG Defence Force, some were involved in the operation, and Australia withdrew two officers who would have been involved in direct ground operations. Eventually Australia decided to allow Australian Defence Force personnel on loan to the PNG Defence Force to deploy to Espiritu Santo in support roles. It also committed the Royal Australian Air Force to flying supplies to Luganville, although not to transport PNG Defence Force troops.¹³

Australia's support for the PNG Defence Force during the Santo Rebellion ultimately did not have negative repercussions. But it is a reminder that allies often have little control over each other and need to be very confident in the decision-making of their allied government and its command-and-control of its defence force.

Australia may also be called on respond to complex domestic security challenges in PNG

At article 4, the Pukpuk Treaty provides that Australia and PNG will 'assist one another to maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to protect their sovereignty'. In the event of a 'security-related development that threatens the sovereignty, peace or stability of either' Australia or PNG, they will 'consult' to 'consider whether any measures should be taken in relation to that threat'. The words 'mutual defence' in the title of the Pukpuk Treaty should therefore not be read as implying that the treaty relates only to external threats – there are several internal security issues that may challenge PNG's sovereignty.

The most significant internal security issue in PNG is the undecided political future of its Bougainville region. An overwhelming majority of Bougainvilleans voted for independence from PNG in an internationally recognised free-and-fair referendum in December 2019. But ultimately the decision comes down to the PNG Parliament, which has long been reluctant to advance Bougainville's independence bid. There have been some promising moves towards implementation over the last few years, but it remains unclear whether the PNG Parliament will ultimately approve Bougainville's independence. If it does not, armed factions in Bougainville could become frustrated. Although Bougainvilleans have worked hard to build and maintain peace, weapons disposal remains incomplete.

The PNG Government may call on Australia to assist to respond to any instability in Bougainville. Australia would then face pressure to demonstrate its reliability as an ally. Australia may also face a situation where it feels obliged to act to prevent the PNG Government from seeking assistance from other partners, such as China.

Given the history of human rights abuses by the PNG Defence Force during the Bougainville crisis in the 1990s,¹⁴ the Australian public may not support Australia assisting the PNG Defence Force to quell Bougainville's independence.

When considering its response, the Australian Government needs to recall that, during the Bougainville crisis, it received assurances from the PNG Defence Force that Australian-donated UH-1H Iroquois utility helicopters would not be used for offensive actions in Bougainville, but would

¹² Matthew Gubb, *Vanuatu's Santo Rebellion —International Responses to a Microstate Security Crisis*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence no. 107 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, ANU, 1994); Norman MacQueen, 'Beyond Tok Win: The Papua New Guinea intervention in Vanuatu, 1980', *Pacific Affairs* (1988) 61(2): 235–252.

¹³ Bob Breen, *The Good Neighbour: Australian Peace Support Operations in the Pacific Islands 1980–2006* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Marilyn T. Havini, *A Compilation of Human Rights Abuses against the People of Bougainville 1989–1995*, 1, (Bougainville Freedom Movement, 1995); Marilyn T. Havini, *A Compilation of Human Rights Abuses against the People of Bougainville 1989–1996*, 2, (Bougainville Freedom Movement, 1996).

instead be used only for troop transport, patrolling, surveillance, and medical evacuation.¹⁵ Despite this, there were credible reports that the PNG Defence Force tied machine-guns to the Iroquois helicopters to turn them into gunships and used the Iroquois helicopters to dump bodies at sea after the 1990 ‘Valentine’s Day Massacre’.¹⁶ The PNG Defence Force also reportedly used Australian-donated Pacific Patrol Boats to shell coastal villages in Bougainville.¹⁷ The Australian High Commissioner to PNG, Allan Taylor, protested about these reports to the PNG Government, but achieved little, partly because the PNG Government seemed incapable of controlling the PNG Defence Force.

Before recommending approval of the Pukpuk Treaty, the Committee needs a clear understanding of the situations in which Australia will respond to PNG’s request for assistance, the type of support that Australia will provide, and the conditions under which it will provide it.

Australia can’t defend or secure PNG

Australia has made significant undertakings to defend PNG in the Pukpuk Treaty which we are at risk of being unable to meet. We do not have the defence (or policing) capacity to defend or stabilise a sprawling country like PNG.

Australia’s reliance on American assistance to stabilise Timor-Leste after its 1999 independence referendum illustrates the logistical challenges it faces when making large deployments, even in the region.¹⁸ While Australia’s defence capabilities have improved since then, if there was serious unrest it would still likely only have the capacity to secure key cities in PNG and evacuate Australian citizens.

If Australia does not respond to a call for support by PNG, this would damage our reputation in the Pacific Islands region – our other Pacific security partners would begin to question our commitment and capacity to secure the region and may seek alternative partners with interests inimical to ours. While this is an extant risk, given the Australian Government’s claim to be the region’s primary security partner, it is heightened by the binding security guarantee we provide in the Pukpuk Treaty.

The treaty might be unenforceable

Although Australia may calculate that its strategic interests mean that it should uphold its side of the Pukpuk Treaty, there are very few practical ways that Australia could enforce the Pukpuk Treaty against PNG. While treaties are theoretically legally binding,¹⁹ there are few feasible legal options for an ally to pursue to enforce a treaty. The constant agonising in Australia about whether the United States will meet its obligations under the ANZUS Treaty exemplifies how little confidence allies often have in the binding nature of their treaties.

The Trump Administration’s actions also illustrate how quickly a change of government can switch foreign and strategic policy directions, including obligations under longstanding treaties. Like the ANZUS Treaty, the risk of unenforceability of the Pukpuk Treaty is higher for Australia. Australia’s anxieties about China mean that it needs the treaty more than PNG does.

Sanctions are the most likely way Australia could try to enforce the treaty if, say, PNG breached it by striking a security deal with China. But sanctions can be ineffective, as was demonstrated during

¹⁵ Raath, *Moral Support?*, 16.

¹⁶ Peter Hastings, ‘St Valentine massacre on Bougainville’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 March 1990; Mary-Louise O’Callaghan and Greg Austin, ‘Aust copters used in PNG massacre’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 June 1990.

¹⁷ Amnesty International, *Papua New Guinea: ‘Under the Barrel of a Gun’ —Bougainville 1991 to 1993* (Amnesty International, 1993); United Nations, *Human Rights Violations in Bougainville: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. E/CN.4/1994/60, 28 January 1994.

¹⁸ Iain Henry, ‘Playing Second Fiddle on the Road to INTERFET: Australia’s East Timor Policy Throughout 1999’, *Security Challenges* (2013) 9(1): 87-112.

¹⁹ Yuji Iwasawa, ‘Various Means of Enforcement in International Law’, *Harvard International Law Journal* (2023) 65(1): 1-24.

Australia's response to the 2006 military coup in Fiji, when our sanctions had a negligible effect on returning Fiji to democracy.

Alternatively, Australia could threaten to withdraw its support if PNG breached the treaty. But this is also unlikely because Australia knows China is likely to step into any gap. This has been demonstrated in Solomon Islands. Even though Australia has a 2017 security treaty with Solomon Islands and invested A\$3 billion in the 2003–17 Regional Assistance Mission,²⁰ Solomon Islands still signed a security agreement with China in 2022.

PNG Prime Minister James Marape has already said that there is a 'high possibility' that PNG would not enter a potential conflict involving Australia and China.²¹ If this was the case, one of the main selling points of the Pukpuk Treaty for Australia, access to bases in PNG, would potentially become useless.

Can Australia meet Papua New Guinea's expectations?

The Committee needs to be satisfied that both the Australian and PNG Governments have a good understanding of each other's expectations under the Pukpuk Treaty, and their capacity to meet them.

Australia's motivation for the signing the Pukpuk Treaty are primarily driven by our concern about how strategic competition in the broader Indo-Pacific is reverberating in the Pacific Islands region. We are particularly concerned by China's increasingly visible presence in the Pacific Islands region and keen to preserve our role as the region's primary security partner.

PNG's motivations are likely more complex and include a combination of a desire to secure assistance to respond to: internal security challenges (including in the restive Highlands region and Bougainville); instability over its border with Indonesia; and threats in its extensive maritime territory. For the reasons given, Australia's capacity, let alone willingness, to meet all these expectations is questionable. We need to have conversations about this now, when we have the time to do so, rather than when a crisis occurs and we are under pressure to respond.

Will the Pukpuk Treaty have unintended consequences in PNG?

Papua New Guinean scholar Michael Kabuni has outlined well the risks that the Pukpuk Treaty may have for internal stability in PNG,²² including that having a larger and better-armed PNG Defence Force may generate the risk of political coups (as illustrated by military coups in Fiji) and may exacerbate ongoing tribal conflicts. He also observes that the Pukpuk Treaty effectively overturns PNG's longstanding commitment to neutrality, including as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement. There is also the potential for the constitutionality of the Pukpuk Treaty to be challenged in the PNG Supreme Court. While these concerns are ultimately for the PNG Government to evaluate, they may affect Australia's relationship with PNG.

Can Australia justify the cost at home?

Australian taxpayers – already experiencing cost-of-living pressures – need to be told what funding commitments the government has made – and will make – to fund its Pukpuk Treaty commitments. Australia's promise of A\$600 million to fund a PNG team in the National Rugby League is

²⁰ 'RAMSI concludes 14-year mission', *ABC Pacific Beat*, 29 June 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/programs/pacificbeat/ramsi-concludes-14-year-mission/8664770>.

²¹ Patrick Bell, 'Papua New Guinea may sit out potential conflict between Australia and China despite Pukpuk defence treaty', *ABC News*, 6 October 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-10-06/png-may-sit-out-australia-china-conflict-despite-defence-pct/105859432>.

²² Michael Kabuni, 'Australia's risk in PNG: why the Pukpuk Treaty could backfire', *DevPolicy*, 19 September 2025, <https://devpolicy.org/australias-risk-in-png-why-the-pukpuk-treaty-could-backfire/>.

already attracting opposition at home.²³ It is unclear that the Australian public will indefinitely support extensive spending to meet PNG's expectations, particularly as media reporting about corruption in PNG is common.

The Pukpuk Treaty is a blank cheque that Australia might not be able to pay

Australia has legitimate strategic interests in PNG. As such, it's understandable why a defence treaty is tempting.

But for 50 years, Australian governments have resisted this temptation because they decided that the risks outweighed the rewards.

This remains the case – the risks remain high and the rewards are too uncertain.

The Committee should recommend to Parliament that the Pukpuk Treaty be rejected and that the existing 2023 bilateral security agreement, which achieves many of the same ends without imposing binding obligations, continue to stand as the primary arrangement for determining Australia's security relationship with PNG.

²³ See, for example, a petition by Pauline Hanson's One Nation, 'Oppose the Allocation of \$600 Million to the NRL for an 18th Team in Papua New Guinea', <https://www.onenation.org.au/oppose-the-allocation-of-600-million-to-the-nrl-for-an-18th-team-in-papua-new-guinea>.