FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 15.06.2023 | Barbara Barkhausen

Papua New Guinea: Friend to all, enemy to none

China and the US are both courting Papua New Guinea. But the Americans are making it easy for their competitor to gain a stronghold on the island

When Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Papua New Guinea (PNG) five years ago, there was no doubt that China had big ambitions for the region. The visit's significance did not escape PNG either and it rolled out the red carpet for the Chinese leader, both literally and metaphorically.

American President Joe Biden would have expected a similarly ceremonious welcome in May — after all, a special public holiday was declared to mark his visit. However, unlike Xi, Biden cancelled the visit at short notice due to the US debt-ceiling crisis, a move that was met with great disappointment in PNG. 'We even declared a National Public Holiday for Biden's historic visit', political activist Martyn Namorong posted on Twitter, 'only to be thrown under the bus by the US'. 'The US keeps shooting itself in the foot', Namorong wrote in another post, as 'China doesn't have to deal with such internal squabbling'.

A power struggle in the Pacific

Indeed, Biden's decision came just at the right time for Beijing. It enabled Chinese state media to continue spinning the narrative that domestic politics in the US is in a state of chaos and the country was proving to be an unreliable ally. China's President must have been rubbing his hands together in glee. The fact that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken hastily travelled to the region in Biden's place to sign a defence cooperation pact between the two countries did little to improve the situation. According to Blinken, the pact was intended to improve PNG's military capabilities, including, for instance, joint military training exercises.

The fact that the two most powerful countries in the world are both courting PNG is partly down to the important geostrategic position of

the Pacific island state. Papua New Guinea is situated north of Australia and as such is seen as a gateway to Asia and the Pacific countries. The geostrategic significance is certainly 'a factor', confirmed Dr. Meg Keen, Director of the Pacific Islands Program run by Sydney-based think tank, the Lowy Institute. But PNG and the region are also 'important' for other reasons, emphasised Keen, including bordering territorial waters, integrated information and communication technology, commercial interests and diplomatic alliances.

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Its strategic location already drew attention to PNG during the Second World War. At that time, the Japanese had developed a strategy which envisaged the capital, Port Moresby, as one of the key ports for their advance into Southeast Asia. 'Papua New Guinea is by far the most populous and influential country in the Pacific – at least twice as big as New Zealand', adds Ian Kemish, a former senior Australian diplomat, expert on Southeast Asia and the Pacific and currently a professor at the University of Queensland in Australia. Not only is the country located at the intersection of Asia and the Pacific, it also has huge mineral wealth.

And PNG's Prime Minster James Marape wants his country to benefit from these advantages. The cooperation pact with the US will help Papua New Guinea improve its military capabilities and develop a 'robust economy', Marape said. Yet, entirely in keeping with the strategy of 'friend to all, enemy to none' pursued by many Pacific states, Marape also accepts Chinese favours to advance the development of his country. Papua New Guinea is currently in talks with Beijing on a free trade deal. Already during his state visit in 2018, China's president upgraded the Sino–Pacific relations to the level of a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' — one of the highest categories of bilateral relations in China's diplomatic jargon. The fact that PNG is also part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) completes the overall picture. With the initiative, the People's Republic of China is investing in infrastructure projects and at the same time skilfully expanding its global power. As a result, poorer countries often fall into the debt trap, which is likely to make them more cautious. After all, who criticises their financier?

Economic potential against historical ties

In an interview with China's state-owned newspaper *The Global Times* around a year ago, Chinese Ambassador to PNG, Zeng Fanhua, reported on a new technology for upland rice cultivation, improvements to the power grid and a new hospital that was being built with China's assistance. Zeng also talked about bridge, road and airport projects, emphasising that China was providing PNG with 'economic and technical assistance without any political conditions attached'.

Aforementioned expert Ian Kemish is more sceptical about this list, however. His research has revealed that the extent of Chinese involvement in PNG is 'usually greatly exaggerated'. For although the Chinese like to talk about their good deeds, in reality, the People's Republic 'has invested very little in Papua New Guinea's development'. Among the projects that made it into the news in the past were also a number of more dubious ones, such as the development of Daru Island, one of the Torres Strait islands between Australia and PNG. All of a sudden, on this island of just 15 square kilometres, a Chinese company was planning to build a new city with a commercial and industrial zone as well as a port. Moreover, talks were ongoing about a 'comprehensive multi-functional fishery industrial park', despite the fact that fishing is strictly regulated in the waters of the Torres Strait.

Australia controlled the British colony of Papua, the southeastern part of the island, from 1906, and at the end of the First World War, the former German colonial territory of German New Guinea also came under the Australian mandate.

Although it is unlikely that China will be able to conclude a similar security agreement with PNG to the one it signed with the Solomon Islands, it still has a foothold on the island nation, at least from an economic perspective. When it comes to the issue of security, however, PNG tends to sympathise with the US or Australia, something which, according to Keen, is partially rooted in its history. Australia controlled the British colony of Papua, the southeastern part of the island, from 1906 and at the end of the First World War, the former German colonial territory of German New Guinea also came under the Australian mandate. Although PNG declared independence in 1975, its ties with Australia remain close. In the current fiscal year alone, Australia has already granted over 600 million Australian dollars (equivalent to €365 million) in aid money to PNG. Australia, like the US,

also helped the country to develop and improve the important Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island. The naval facility was constructed by the United States in as early as 1944, that is during the Second World War.

For PNG, the foreign policy approach of 'friend to all, enemy to none' has thus worked successfully for a long time. It can therefore be assumed that the country will continue to pursue the same policy and use the competition between the US and China to its own advantage.



Barbara Barkhausen
Sydney

Barbara Barkhausen is a journalist and television and radio producer. She lives in Australia, where she works as a foreign correspondent for German, Swiss and Austrian media. She is also the author of several books on Australia.