

***Australia's Northern Shield?
Papua New Guinea and the Defence of
Australia since 1880***

Bruce Hunt

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Reviewer: James Batley

Hugh White tells a story that, on a 1986 visit to Indonesia as Minister for Defence in the Hawke Government, Kim Beazley called on military commander-in-chief Benny Murdani. The latter's abrupt and deliberately off-putting first question to Beazley was "Would you go to war over PNG?" Beazley's response: "Yes... but we wouldn't tell them that!"

This story doesn't appear in Bruce Hunt's new book *Australia's Northern Shield?*, but it wouldn't have been out of place. Hunt explores the place of Papua New Guinea in Australian defence and strategic thinking since the 1880s, through to the conclusion of the bilateral Joint Declaration of Principles in 1987. Much of this is seen through the broader perspective of Australia's developing relationships with East Asia. While many aspects of this story have been covered by previous authors, Hunt's work is valuable in bringing the Papua New Guinea story into a single narrative. Beyond this, the book's originality lies in Hunt's access to a previously untapped source, the Australian Cabinet Notebooks from the 1950s onwards. The Notebooks record the unedited views of ministers in discussion around the Cabinet table and—contrary to Prime Minister MacMahon's apparent wish—happily were not destroyed. Access to the Notebooks gives Hunt grounds to engage with the views of a range of earlier historians on such basic questions such as Australia's evolving attitude towards Indonesia and engagement with Southeast Asia. Hunt also argues persuasively on the basis of the Cabinet Notebooks that John McEwen (Country Party leader from 1958-1971) was more influential in Australian Government thinking on defence and strategic policy than previously understood.

One of Hunt's key themes is the strong sense of continuity in Australian approaches towards Papua New Guinea over more than a century. He opens his book by quoting Queensland Premier Thomas McIlwraith in 1883: "The establishment of a foreign power in the neighbourhood of Australia would be injurious to ... Australia's interests." He then provides a virtually interchangeable line from the 2016 Defence White Paper: "Australia cannot

be secure if our immediate neighbourhood, including PNG, became the source of threat to Australia.” Hunt writes: “For over a century Australia has viewed the defence relationship with ... Papua New Guinea[,] in the context of the intrusion of foreign powers or an anxiety about the stability and dependability of the country itself.”

The book is structured chronologically, with Hunt tracking the place of Papua New Guinea (in its various guises) in Australian thinking through the pre-Federation era; the First and Second World Wars; protracted uncertainty over the fate of Dutch New Guinea; Konfrontasi; and finally the calmer waters of the post-Sukarno era. He then moves to the post-Vietnam War period which includes Papua New Guinea’s Independence in 1975 and its aftermath.

Along the way he highlights the persistence of certain key themes characterising and influencing Australia’s approach to Papua New Guinea. Perhaps foremost among these is a sense of anxiety (the word is peppered throughout the book) on the part of Australian ministers and senior policymakers regarding rising and/or disruptive powers in the Asia Pacific: first Germany, then Japan and then, for most of the period he covers, Indonesia. Hunt also tracks the persistent temptation—never completed succumbed to but never entirely suppressed either—on the part of Australian governments to declare an antipodean Monroe Doctrine. Hunt reminds us that support for the territorial unity of Papua New Guinea has been a foundation of Australian policy since the 1960s. (He also records that, as far back as the late 1940s, Australian governments identified Manus Island and its facilities as a strategic asset in protecting Australia’s northern approaches. *Plus ça change...*)

Against the background of these secular continuities, Hunt tracks an important shift in emphasis in assessments of the implications of Papua New Guinea’s vulnerability for Australia: less focused on external penetration or attack (although this has never entirely gone away), and more focused on internal stability. Hunt dates this shift to the early 1970s.

One of the questions Hunt sets out to address is why Australia did not offer the newly independent state of Papua New Guinea a formal defence guarantee. There was a bipartisan consensus in Australia on this question: both sides of politics saw unacceptable risks in offering Papua New Guinea an unconditional security guarantee, not least because of how this might be read in Jakarta. (It is of course not irrelevant that the emerging Papua New Guinean leaders themselves were not looking for a formal defence pact between the two countries.) At the same time, Australian governments were anxious—there’s that word again—to avoid assuming ultimate responsibility for Papua New Guinea’s internal security.

What emerges from the book is a sense of ambivalence in Australia's approach towards Papua New Guinea; this perhaps justifies the question mark in Hunt's title. In a curious way, Papua New Guinea has been seen as both an asset and a liability for Australia's defence and national security—at times simultaneously. Over time, Australian governments have sought to maximise Papua New Guinea's value to Australia as an element in our national defence and our national security more broadly, while also working to minimise the possibility of other powers doing the same thing. At the same time, Australian governments have been keen to avoid open-ended commitments, and to avoid taking Papua New Guinea's problems on as our own problems.

Australia has certainly been successful in remaining Papua New Guinea's primary defence and security partner since 1975: this was one of the key objectives agreed by Australian governments of both hues in the lead-up to Independence, and it has been reiterated in successive Defence White Papers including in 2016. Yet when it comes to questions of internal stability, it has on occasion been difficult for Australian governments to strike the right balance between committed support and assuming responsibility. While most of Papua New Guinea's history as an independent nation falls outside the scope of Hunt's book, Australia's approach to the Bougainville crisis (at least until 1997) and the Enhanced Cooperation Program (2004-5) are just two examples which illustrate the difficulty of getting that balance right. And few in 1975 would have anticipated the extent to which police, as distinct from defence, cooperation has become a core and seemingly permanent element in the bilateral relationship.

Overall, readers of Hunt's book will be struck at the way the themes he sketches out resonate with Australia's current preoccupations and anxieties regarding Papua New Guinea. With Papua New Guinea hosting APEC in 2018; with a possible referendum on Bougainville's independence looming in 2019; with growing Chinese investment and interest in Papua New Guinea: Australia's interests remain inescapably engaged.

Hunt has done a great service to all students of Australia's relations with Papua New Guinea, and to all policymakers concerned with this vital relationship. One can only hope that a sequel, tracking events from 1987 to the present day, is in the pipeline.

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