



## THE SOVEREIGN FAILED STATE OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA – THE ADF’S NEXT MAJOR TRIAL

Tom Eddie

### SYNOPSIS

A range of factors undermining the government of Papua New Guinea (PNG) is making it look more like a failed state, with some crying that it [already is](#). PNG failing would be a strategic risk too great for Australia to allow. The risk of violent conflict and foreign exploitation that surface in the absence of effective government is a major concern for Australia. We have adopted certain responsibility over our regional partners, and through them we forward our own strategic interests. If a state as central to Australia’s regional strategy as PNG were to fail, we would have a responsibility to intervene with military means to support the autonomy of the PNG government, and preserve our strategic freedom in the South West Pacific. A disintegration of PNG’s sovereignty has the potential to escalate conflict in neighbouring areas and attract a potentially hostile power to spread its economic and military interests inside Australia’s area of influence. A violent conflict is not a current likelihood, but Australia must consider the circumstances in which a large-scale military intervention could happen and how we would address it. The adage that Australia finds itself situated within an [‘Arc of Instability’](#) rings ever truer as South West Pacific nations link PNG continue to climb the Fragile States index.

## HOW PNG IS FAILING

If a nation does not sufficiently represent, control or forward the interests of its people, it is considered to have become a [failed state](#). Whether from internal or external influences, if a state fails, its sovereignty is lost. The metrics of failed statehood are generally defined as the following failures of government:

- Failing service delivery
- Falling revenues
- National fragmentation
- Increasing fragility of government institutions
- Poor economic performance
- External pressure
- Lack of legitimacy of government in the eyes of the populace.

In the past few decades, we have seen major cases such as Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Libya, Iraq and Syria fail, and their borders partly disintegrate. When this happens, the state is at further risk of external factors exacerbating restoration efforts on the one hand, and on the other, internal strife spreading to neighbouring regions where similar metrics of failed statehood can be found. There is a parallel here for PNG, which will be discussed later.

Fund for Peace puts PNG at [48<sup>th</sup> on the Fragile States index list](#), due primarily to demographic pressure, uneven development and public services being of concerning levels. The people of PNG do not feel adequately represented by their leadership and prosperity is suffering. Despite billions of dollars of aid and foreign investment, [Australia's efforts](#) (historically subcontracted out to AusAid) to ensure the success of the PNG state experiment have been slowly failing. Its rank on the Fragile States list is [expected to climb](#). Commentators in PNG are calling the government a [kleptocracy](#), with self-interest and theft being rife at all levels of society. [Liquefied natural gas](#) floods through the hands of [corrupt government officials](#), and expected expansions to copper mining make the country a target for foreign exploitation. HIV-AIDS has risen to a level equal to that of many African countries, and problems of discipline in the PNG Defence Force extend as far as military personnel engaging in [piracy](#). Mass looting in Port Moresby during a fire in March 2017 demonstrated that [opportunism](#) in a semi-lawless state trumps civil order. Organised crime, corruption and terrorist cells could find roots in-place of effective government and many of the seven million citizens would seek safer, more prosperous places to live. PNG features one of the densest cultural cauldrons in the world, so if statehood there were to fail, nationalist sentiment would give way to tribalism in the highly artificial post-colonial state. Insurrection and insurgency would be expected consequences as humanitarian

assistance and disaster relief (HADR) efforts cease to be effective in a failed state. These factors would have direct impacts on PNG's neighbours, but the greatest responsibility would fall on Australia to act.

While state infrastructure in PNG is able to maintain economic activity and safety for the populace, Australian [policy recommendations](#) will continue to press for strengthened statehood through responsibility sharing and self-sufficiency. This approach involves more comprehensive long-term solutions, mutual responsibility and an invigorated bilateral relationship; but most importantly it would require homegrown bottom-up momentum from PNG. While some new policy initiatives may slow the tide, the current Australian policy of self-sufficiency is not working. Should PNG slip away, the risk factors of violent conflict would become more pressing.

## **SOUTH WEST PACIFIC AS THE NEW FLASHPOINT**

The integrity of PNG statehood is a considerable factor in [containing the Papuan Conflict](#). The potential failing of PNG gives rise to a concerning scenario of ongoing conflict against Indonesian rule in the western half of the island. PNG – through its military and organised militias – plays a large and understated role in the Papua Conflict, because it better represents the ethnic population of the whole island of New Guinea than Indonesia does. If state services continued to fail, the efficacy of the military responses to Indonesian calls for assistance in the Papua province would also fail, as they have [already been seen to](#). As a result of dissolved sovereignty and state control across the island of New Guinea, sectarian dissent and violence would expand both east into a lawless PNG, and westwards in support of ethnic and tribal nationalism in Indonesian Papua. With [growing unity](#) among West Papuan independence movements, alternatives to PNG national identity may rise. The nationalist Free Papua Movement (OPM) in the Indonesian-controlled Western New Guinea continues to be a source of destabilisation between Indonesia and PNG, and amongst Papuan peoples. If that conflict escalated, either of its own accord, or from the exacerbation of lawlessness in PNG, an unsupported and lame PNG Defence Force would not be able to maintain security of the border.

Australia bears almost sole responsibility in ensuring PNG does not fail, following its secession from Australian governance in 1975. Australia has promoted self-sufficiency in the South West Pacific, in order to strengthen the sovereignty of our neighbours. Australian influence can be extended further away from our shores without claiming direct control over these nations, because we have tied their strategic priorities to ours. If they should fail, it would decrease our ability to forward our strategic interests and invite potentially hostile nations to capitalise on their weakness. China using

indefensible PNG territory as a forward operating base is the most concerning outcome for Australia because it would result in their taking advantage of untapped natural resources and extending its freedom of movement in the South Pacific. China's belligerence in the South China Sea highlights their disregard for the sovereignty of smaller nations and abandonment of a responsible rise to power. As China's arm extends, nations unable to defend themselves must be shown to have stronger backing. Therefore, to avoid the long-term security threat of an adversarial power with a military presence inside Australia's area of influence, an intervention would be required to revert the failing institutions of statehood in PNG.

The undertaking of a military intervention in PNG would be enormous, when compared with the relative success of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and International Forces East Timor (INTERFET) operations. Each involvement took place in countries with far smaller populations, and the case of the Solomon Islands, Australia was the only regional power with a [personal stake](#). Furthermore, while INTERFET has been lauded as a model multinational operation, it revealed some [considerable pitfalls](#) in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) that did not materialise only due to the lack of concerted opposition.

In the case of PNG, Australia will again be [pressed to take the lead](#) in humanitarian or armed stabilisation operations, but the scale and complexity of the operating environment would be too great for the ADF alone. Australia would not be able to exclude Indonesia, which has its own desire to see PNG stabilised, though primarily for stability in Western New Guinea. With RAMSI having concluded in 2017, Australia should seek to involve the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force and the Timor-Leste Defence Force in any stabilisation operations conducted in PNG. Making smaller regional partners active participants in any future stabilisation operations would represent a clear demonstration of regional support for the viability for PNG.

Operational planners have argued that the ADF could not even occupy Bougainville if a full insurrection were to occur, due to its poor transport and communications infrastructure and dense jungle in which hostiles could move but mechanised militaries could not. Swathes of PNG territory such as the Southern Highlands already lie beyond the pale of government authority, where thousands have died in tribal fighting since 2000. PNG represents a possible conflict area in which Australia would be required to play a leading role, taking place over a vast and largely unreachable highland jungle landscape, which would be too large for the ADF to address.

## SCOPE OF RESPONSE

In all likelihood, there would be little direct military contests, as was the case in previous operational deployments; but this hypothesis ignores the potential for an insurgency to take shape. Regardless, the number of boots on the ground required to restore security to a failed state and perform HADR operations in PNG would be enormous. Australia would be the likely choice to lead such an operation, having unparalleled regional experience; and extensive rapid deployment training through multilateral exercises such as [Exercise RIMPAC](#), [PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP](#), [Exercise KAKADU](#) and [Exercise TALISMAN SABRE](#). A whole-of-government response to a crisis in PNG would see the deployment of an Australian civil-military response, involving the ADF, the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Border Force. These agencies would be supported by a host of regional neighbours like Indonesia and broader Western allies like the US.

Available capability is a major consideration in the scope of operational planning. While this runs counter to strategic planning wisdoms, the platforms and systems the ADF and its partners can bring to bear would dictate the nature of the stabilising operation, because of the particular operating environment that PNG represents. Recent capability additions to the ADF like the Canberra Class Landing Helicopter Docks (LHDs) would aid a potential intervention. LHDs enable greater littoral penetration and provide an [offshore base](#), while also being able to carry a battle group of 1100 personnel, 100 armoured vehicles, 12 helicopters and a 40 bed hospital. Additionally, the possible [replacement](#) of the AusTigers with the AH-6/MH-6 Little Birds would mean having a future-proofed light reconnaissance helicopter able to provide support for forces in hard to reach areas of PNG. The new Hawkei protected mobility vehicles (PMVs) are our only helicopter-deployable armoured vehicle, and add a robust light transport capability to navigate poor, remote roads. Using Main Battle Tanks and Joint Strike Fighters would be a fruitless venture in a stabilising operation in PNG; the operation would require considerable boots on the ground, supported by versatile, light ADF platforms.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Policymakers need to begin making stronger statements about the importance of PNG to Australia in the Asian Century. PNG has been an invaluable bolster to maintaining the status quo in our region, but the status quo is being undermined by Beijing, Moscow and elements in Washington. The cost of supporting and revitalising state services to revert the course of PNG will require a considerable increase to the annual [AU\\$546m](#) development assist package provided to PNG by the Australian Government. However, the cost of allowing PNG to slip away from centralised control would far outweigh that expense.

Again, it is not the intention to argue a violent conflict is going to occur in PNG, but with state building exercises and many state institutions failing, the Australian Government must address this risk. Australia must work harder to strengthen our established trade with PNG's and work more closely with the PNG Government to mature government services across the country.

As the situation in PNG worsens, contingency operational planning must be graduated from a largely academic consideration within the national security agencies, to a primary focus for Defence and the ADF. The Australian Government must increase our political presence to assist with the provision of services and development of infrastructure within PNG, or we will be forced to pick up the pieces of a failed state over the next couple of decades. Australia must do more to guarantee the stability and prosperity of PNG, so that it remains the sovereign state we want it to be.