

The defence modernization in Papua New Guinea, between domestic issues, economy and geopolitics

Despite being the third largest state for size in Oceania, Papua New Guinea (PNG) is still struggling to find its own geopolitical position in the region. Ideally located on the border between Asia and Oceania - although for conventional reasons is usually included in Oceania - Papua New Guinea apparently looks like a land full of diversity and possibilities, but unable to exert a real geopolitical influence. Over the years, several factors have hampered this development, such as a weak economy and some internal problems, including the issue of separatism: the country is rich in ethnic groups, religions, languages, diversity and raw materials (without mentioning the strategic position) but has remained until now on the edge of regional geopolitics. PNG's armed forces have always been under-funded and unable to express a real military capacity. For many years instead they have been used as a support to the police, mainly to tackle internal threats and without any international projection. Despite the efforts of some of the PNG's allies, such as the USA, the neighboring Australia or New Zealand, Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF, the armed forces of Papua New Guinea) are still in an embryonic development. In 2016-2017 PNGDF has begun an internal debate about a possible modernization and an increase of funds and technologies, but in the absence of a solid economic growth and a certain degree of political stability, it is unlikely that this new defense reform will have real effects on the military sector of the country, and, ultimately, on the foreign policy of Papua New Guinea.

Papua New Guinea and domestic policy

Despite the recent independence (1975), since its beginning Papua New Guinea has been entangled in a series of internal disorders and clashes between factions (especially during the '90s), which cost nearly 20.000 lives. The center of these clashes was the island of Bougainville, before World War I known as "German Guinea". For years in the island there have been clashes, which ended only after the concession of local autonomy and the promise of a future referendum on independence: today Bougainville enjoys a status of autonomy, but in the future it may choose the path of complete independence from PNG. The country's political history has always been troubled: the political system, even if has a (formal) similarity with the Western democracies, is highly fragmented, despite having a unicameral parliament composed of 109 elected members. Small parties, instability of governments and corruption are some of the major problems that Papua politics has to face. These issues, combined with the long internal clashes and corruption, did not contribute to the strengthening of the country and its stability. The last legislative elections, held in 2012, have brought to the position of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill, expression of the party People's National Congress. The election of O'Neill, former entrepreneur and a "veteran" of Papuan politics, has put an end to a complicated constitutional problem (a direct consequence of the internal animosity) emerged in 2011-2012. At that time the old Prime Minister, Michael Somare, absent from the country for health reasons (he was in a hospital in Singapore) was "replaced" by O'Neill. The return of Somare and his protest against this substitution ignited a tough controversy that involved the highest levels of the judiciary in PNG, and that has also created a small mutiny of fifteen soldiers who tried to arrest the chief of defence staff. The political impasse and the legal and constitutional implications of this clash between "two prime ministers" had also repercussions on the economy, and confirmed the traditional fragility of Papuan politics. The mandate of O'Neill is going to finish in 2017, and the date of the next parliamentary elections will be announced in

spring; the Prime Minister, during his tenure, have been accused of some corruption scandals, to which he responded by replacing the chief of police. Eventually, from a political point of view, PNG continues to show considerable volatility, and this does not help the government policies neither the economic situation, still in very poor conditions. Australia and New Zealand remain the closest strategic partners for the Papuan government.

Economy and geopolitics

At first glance, the PNG might seem a country with many economic opportunities, a great potential for tourism but especially a country rich in raw materials. The Papuan subsoil is actually full of minerals, but the exploitation has been difficult due to rugged nature and terrain, lack of infrastructures and high management costs. Much of the economy, therefore, is informal, and consequently the pro capita income is quite low (approximately 3,500 US dollars per year¹).

The mining potential is relevant ("Papua New Guinea is a mining state," recalls the local Mining Authority²), and the commodity export is still one of the main exports of PNG: several minerals, including gold and copper, as well as oil and gas, are important sources of revenue for the trade balance of the country, although oil and gas pipelines and refineries are established and built by foreign companies, particularly American enterprises. Despite some openings (telecommunications, transport, tourism), the country's economy is still fragile and weak, the majority of the population lives in rural areas (about 80%) with limited infrastructures and PNG remains dependent from Australia also in the field of development aid and economic support. Corruption, a high crime rate and political instability did not help the development of national economy, which for the moment is growing only because there is a strong demand for raw materials from other Asian countries. This approach to export has allowed the country to be relatively calm during the post - 2008 economic crisis, although, as mentioned, the overall condition of the Papua New Guinea's economy remain fragile and not so attractive for foreign investment, despite the good potential of the soil. On the geopolitical level, the PNG is an actor with limited options, and considered very close to its Australian neighbor. PNG has a limited diplomatic network in neighboring countries, but for historical and geographical reason maintains a strong relationship with Australia. The base of this strong relationship is an important agreement ("Joint Declaration for a New Papua New Guinea-Australia Partnership") negotiated between the end of 80s and the first years of the '90³. The relationship with Australia is strategic for PNG, and therefore deserves a brief analysis. Among the various areas of bilateral cooperation it should be highlighted the role of economy, security, development and migration, but there are "regular contacts" also on other dossiers, according to the Australian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

On a political level, in 2013 the prime ministers of Australia and PNG established an annual bilateral meeting, while there are other specific *fora* for the different ministers. Australia is a strong investor in PNG (about 20 billion Australian dollars), mainly in the fields of raw materials, gold, oil and natural gas. Australia is also active in the country with other development aid programs, especially focused on the rural sector. "People to people relations" conclude the strong framework of bilateral relations between Australia and PNG; about 10,000 Australians live in Papua land, and "cooperation between people" is a theme often mentioned in the meetings between the prime ministers⁴.

1 <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pp.html>

2 <http://www.mra.gov.pg/>

3 <http://dfat.gov.au/geo/papua-new-guinea/pages/papua-new-guinea-country-brief.aspx>

4 <http://auspng.lowyinstitute.org/>

Defence modernization

The PNG military, also known as Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) is one of the "Achilles' heels" of the country. In comparison with a population of more than six million inhabitants, the PNGDF keeps on active duty less than two thousand soldiers, divided into land component, naval component and air component. The defence budgets amount to nearly the 0.54% of GDP, and the whole PNGDF reflects the substantial lack of funding and investments. The army (about 1,600 men) operates two battalions of light infantry and one of support engineers, without artillery neither armored units; the Navy has about 200 men and a few patrol vessels, while the Air Force has nearly 100 men and a few aircrafts (transport) and helicopters. The defense sector, reduced after the 1999 economic crisis, has been for years exploited as a kind of auxiliary structure of the police force, and this is why the land component is significantly larger. This kind of "law and order" role, the lack of international experience and the underfunding of the military has created discomfort and discouragement in the PNGDF, and it seems that there have been some cases of disaffection and inefficiency among the soldiers. It is important, also in this field, the cooperation with the Armed Forces of Australia, New Zealand the US, also active as trainers of the PNGDF units. The chronic underfunding of the defense even in these years of great change has being questioned in 2013, when the Papuan Ministry of Defense released the "*Papua New Guinea Defence White Paper 2013*" a "road map" for the future of PNG defense. The aim of the future reform is to increase up to 5,000 men the soldiers and officers in active duty, plus 1000 reservists: the reform should be fully implemented in 2030. Given the initial numbers it does not seem an ambitious plan, but it should be remembered that this increase has been defined by the Military Balance 2015 as "widely unrealistic" because it would require an increase in military expenditure from 0.54% of GDP to nearly 3%. The Defence White Paper has then listed the internal and external threats (sometimes mixing the two plans), to outline the main aims of the PNGDF and try to schedule a transition towards a more efficient military force. The transition is divided in three stages, 2017, 2020 and 2030. The Defence White Paper is presented like a strategic document of a country with limited ambitions. The main objectives of the PNGDF are:

- National Defence;
- Assistance in civilian emergencies;
- *Nation building*;
- International obligations.

Among the main security threats identified in PNG, the White Paper includes threats like international crime, cybercrime, food, water and pandemics, alongside more traditional issues such as rebalancing of US and China in the Pacific, geopolitics of Oceania and terrorism⁵. But if these are the ambitions, the future scenario looks more complicated. One of the few messages is the will of the government to increase the soldiers in active duty, while improving the training and technology available for the PNGDF, as clearly indicated on the official web site of the armed forces⁶. In this regard, in December 2016 the Chief of Defence Staff, General Toropo, released a new document⁷, where he tried to focus on the defense modernization highlighting some trends of research and development.

Among the various areas affected and apart from some references to the military chaplaincy or the housing problem, the General pointed out the need to restructure the information and intelligence sector, the improvement of conditions of non-commissioned officers, the restructure of logistics, the

5 <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/131220-PNG-Defence-White-Paper.pdf>, p. 16

6 <http://www.pngdefence.gov.pg/index.php/2016-05-08-15-09-22>

7 http://www.pngdefence.gov.pg/images/publications/commanders_statement_of_intent_2016.pdf

development of joint training and operations, and a reflection on the procurement mechanisms for the acquisition of platforms and technologies. In December 2016 General Toropo announced that in 2018 PNG will obtain from Australia four patrol vessels⁸, while in 2017 it is planned the acquisition of six airplanes, four PAC 750 and two PAC CT 4: they will be used to train the air component of PNGDF, but they will also serve for internal logistical tasks, such as medical or supplies transportation in disadvantaged areas of the country. The overall PNGDF reform, a process that could not be postponed anymore, is quite ambitious and, as is often remembered by military documents, aims at providing an ambitious military instrument to the new government that will take office after the elections of 2017. The cooperation with traditional international partners will be increased, and the country seems to have become aware that the geopolitical context in which it operates is changing. The new acquisitions, however limited, could be the beginning of a positive trend of modernization of the military, although much remains to be done in the PNGDF.

Analysis, assessments and forecasts

For many years, PNG has been a peripheral and poor country, concentrated almost exclusively on its domestic problems, its difficult governance, the complicated management of natural resources, mainly exploited by foreigners and the sensitive issue of separatism with its bitter legacy of internal divisions. In this blurry picture it should be put the delicate reform of the armed forces of Papua New Guinea, an ambitious goal that will require much effort from the government and the national economy. The comments regarding the future development of the PNGDF are different, but many consider them with some skepticism: as long as the country does not have a strong institutional tradition, several experts noted, it is difficult to see a more active role of PNGDF in sectors other than “law and order” or police support. The acquisition of new technologies, even if limited, should be coupled with better training and recruitment that tomorrow should enable the PNGDF to operate also beyond the national borders. Finally, the modernization of the defense should serve the foreign policy objectives of the country, which are limited by the modest domestic economic capacity and the political animosity. In the short term the PNG will remain an actor with limited ambitions at the regional level, and its armed forces will have very limited capabilities too.

8 <https://asianmilitaryreview.com/2016/12/pngdf-plans-expansion/>