



Papua New Guinea's Borders: A Retrospective

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Papua New Guinea (PNG) is an 'artificial state', that is to say, a state that did not exist either legally or in the minds of people before the arrival of Europeans. The modern country emerged in the 1970s from a long process of the drawing of its borders by foreigners: Dutch, German, British and Australian. The fundamentals of stable nationhood — a strong sense of nationality — were therefore missing at independence and still are.

Naming and claiming

The first Europeans to engage in naming and claiming in the Pacific Islands region (apart from the British in Norfolk Island in 1788) were the Dutch in New Guinea. The Netherlands, possessor of the Netherlands East Indies, declared the western half of the island, west of 141° longitude, to be Dutch. The Dutch flag was raised over 'Fort Du Bus' on 24 August 1828 by an expedition that attempted to establish a permanent settlement near the coastal villages of the Asmat people. Driven out by malaria, the Dutch abandoned this settlement in 1835, but they left a geographical legacy that remains to this day in the form of West Papua (van der Veur 1966:10).

By the 1880s, the European powers were partitioning as much as they could of Africa and the Pacific. Germany, a new colonial power, acquired territories at a furious rate in 1884 and 1885. Germany clandestinely raised its imperial flag in north-east New Guinea and its offshore islands including New Britain and New Ireland on 6 November 1884. Three days later, Britain declared a protectorate over south-east mainland New Guinea and its offshore islands, which later became the colony of British New Guinea.

The situation called for an amicable arrangement between Britain and Germany, which came in the form of the 1886 Anglo-German Line of Demarcation in the Pacific Ocean. This was a line drawn from north to south down the Pacific, starting north of the Marshall Islands, bisecting the Solomons south of Santa Isabel and joining the border between German and British New Guinea at 8° south latitude. (The Anglo-German border in Solomon Islands was moved north to the Bougainville Strait as part of another Anglo-German deal over Samoa in 1899.)

The agreement created spheres of influence. Roughly speaking, Germany was free to acquire any islands to the west of the line, while Britain took the islands east of the line. Germany picked up Nauru,

which lay west of the line, while Britain established a colonial presence east of the line in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands (Kiribati and Tuvalu). Germany had already established a colonial possession in the Marshall Islands in 1885.

Further alterations to New Guinea's borders were in store. The defeat of Spain in the Spanish–American War enabled Germany to purchase the Caroline Islands (Federated States of Micronesia and Palau) and the Northern Mariana Islands from the Spanish in 1899, and add them to German New Guinea as the 'Island Territory'.

By 1906, the colony of German New Guinea was expanding further. In that year, German New Guinea, already engorged by islands to the north, grew to include Nauru and the Marshall Islands. The result was that from 1906 to 1914, German New Guinea encompassed New Guinea and its offshore islands, Nauru, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau and the northern Mariana Islands — a huge swathe of the western Pacific north and south of the equator including all of modern Micronesia except for Kiribati, which remained British, and Guam, which was American. The key contributor to the finances of this widespread colony was Nauru phosphate. British New Guinea became the Australian territory of Papua in 1906 and was an Australian colonial possession until 1975.

Wars and borders

Both world wars changed the borders and colonial administrations of the Pacific. In 1914, Australia hastened to send an expeditionary force to the capital of German New Guinea, Rabaul, and occupied it with minimal fighting. At the same time, the British had an understanding with Japan that gave the Japanese the green light to occupy German Pacific territory on the outbreak of war: while Japan would be free to take everything north of the equator, the British would take all that lay south of the equator.

This is how part of German New Guinea came under Australian administration, acting as the mandatory power under a League of Nations mandate in what was called Australian New Guinea. The Micronesian part of the German colony, the Island Territory, came under the Japanese as their South Seas Mandate between the wars, and served as the forward bases from which they fought the Pacific War

in the 1940s (Peattie 1988). Nauru became a mandated territory under the British Empire.

For PNG, the end of the war meant the creation of a provisional territory called Papua–New Guinea. Since the New Guinea side was a former German possession, it became the Trust Territory of New Guinea, administered by Australia under the UN Trusteeship System, whereas Papua remained an Australian territory. So from 1949 to 1971, PNG was a combined territory called TP&NG, the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, with slight differences between them. Postage stamps in PNG still bore the title TP&NG until the early 1970s, when the name of the country was finally changed to Papua New Guinea, as it has been ever since. The first chief minister was Michael Somare, whose primary schooling had begun in a Japanese-run school during World War II.

Borders since independence in 1975

Three international borders have preoccupied PNG governments since 1975. The 1985 Torres Strait Treaty created the Torres Strait Protected Zone to 10°30' south latitude so that PNG citizens from 13 nominated villages could make traditional visits into the Torres Strait (after application). As prime minister, Gough Whitlam was willing to give the northern Torres Strait islands to PNG, but a strong popular movement by Torres Strait Islanders in the region succeeded in ensuring that the modern border remains the one drawn in 1879, when the Torres Strait Islands became part of Queensland, thanks mainly to the British Colonial Office. Torres Strait Islanders wanted to remain Australians (Mullins 1992).

The border between PNG and Solomon Islands south of Bougainville has been the subject of a number of bilateral treaties, of which the best known is the 1994 Maritime Boundary Treaty, reached at a time when the Bougainville War was raging and there were occasions when the PNG Defence Force crossed the border and entered the Solomons in pursuit of rebels. If Bougainville succeeds in gaining independence from PNG, the border with Solomon Islands will be a border with Bougainville and necessitate new agreements.

West New Guinea, now West Papua and adjacent provinces, was held and administered by the Dutch in the 1950s, with Australian diplomatic support. The Australian government, under pressure from the British and Americans, withdrew that support in 1962, and a process followed that ended in West New Guinea becoming part of Indonesia (Doran 2001). The PNG–Indonesian border, at least in the north, has been the subject of numerous

disputes between the two countries in the last 50 years, with a major exodus of people from West Papua in the 1980s, fleeing from Indonesian security forces and amounting to at least 12,000 refugees. Some still come.

Borders in historical perspective

Taking possession of overseas territory in the 19th and early 20th centuries involved drawing on maps — often along a line of longitude or latitude — raising plaques with inscriptions, and hoisting flags. The astonishing presumption of the European powers in claiming much of the rest of the world has become striking to us only since World War II, which ushered in a generation of decolonisation in the colonised world. One thing is clear: Europeans drew the borders, changed them, and in the process became the inventors of the territory of modern Papua New Guinea, leaving the Papua New Guineans with the daunting task of creating a nation out of it.

Author notes

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