

## **PNG must take bitter pill to secure its future**

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Once again Australia's ambitious new aid program to Papua New Guinea, the Enhanced Co-operation Program, has been stalled in the name of defending PNG's sovereignty. The irony is that without this program, PNG's sovereignty in terms of the state's ability to carry out its core functions will continue to crumble.

The ground-breaking nature of the ECP comes from PNG's agreement to compromise its sovereignty in the short term in order to strengthen it in the long term. This paradox characterises all internationally sponsored state-building endeavours. This is what the ECP really is and it would be better if everyone was open about it.

If PNG wants to revive the program it must amend its constitution. But it should use the opportunity of renewed debate to face its predicament more honestly, explicitly address the need for a short-term sovereignty concession, and legislate accordingly. Although this might be anathema to the fathers of independence, it is time for PNG's pragmatic young guard to make themselves heard.

Australia could help them by making clearer that the long-term goal of any intervention is to realise the self-determination that independence hasn't delivered — it's not a takeover, as the rhetoric sometimes suggests. The program should be seen as continuing the work of decolonisation rather than a return to colonialism. After all, the most common criticism of Australia's rule of PNG is that we got out too quickly.

An emphasis on self-determination would highlight the temporary nature of PNG's sovereignty concession and provide a benchmark against which the program could be assessed.

The self-determination message would also provide the ECP with much-needed vision. Its success will depend on popular support in PNG, especially among PNG officialdom. Their attitudes will be particularly important when the program begins to tackle corrupt vested interests. But so far the public diplomacy effort has been focused on watering down unrealistic expectations to forestall disappointment.

Public diplomacy could also help resolve the current impasse. If negotiations prove intractable, the temptation will be to leverage PNG's economic dependence on Australia. But as the South Pacific's emerging superpower, we should heed lessons learned by the United States about the limits of hard power. We should be ready to bypass the Port Moresby elites and go straight to the people. The strong affinity many ordinary Papua New Guineans feel with Australia is a rich seam that is largely unmined.

Decolonisation has produced few unqualified successes around the world. With the benefit of hindsight, most former colonisers, and doubtless many of the formerly colonised, would be grateful for a chance to revisit past mistakes.

Australia left PNG peacefully and the underlying relationship remains stronger than many post-colonial relationships, despite recent tension, and is relatively uncomplicated by third parties' interests. We should have a better chance than most of getting on with the real business of co-operative state-building.

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