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Securing Regional Influence in a Contested Pacific: The Pukpuk Treaty as Instrument of Australia's Foreign Policy toward Papua New Guinea

Ferditania Estirahayu, Rodon Pedrason, Anak Agung Banyu Perwita
Defense University, Indonesia
ferditania.estirahayu@gmail.com

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Abstract

Although geopolitical competition in the Pacific has attracted increasing scholarly attention, studies specifically examining the Pukpuk Treaty as a multidimensional instrument of Australia's foreign policy toward Papua New Guinea (PNG) remain limited. Existing scholarship has largely emphasized Australia–China rivalry at the macro-regional level, while the interaction between strategic competition, bureaucratic dynamics, and defense diplomacy within the treaty framework remains underexplored. This study aims to analyze how Australia uses the Pukpuk Treaty to maintain regional influence amid intensifying geopolitical competition in the Pacific. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research examines Australia–PNG security relations within the broader Indo-Pacific strategic environment. Data were collected through document analysis and literature review of official government publications, policy reports, bilateral cooperation documents, and academic literature. The analysis applies Neoclassical Realism, the Bureaucratic Politics Model, and Defense Diplomacy as complementary analytical frameworks. The findings indicate that the Pukpuk Treaty reflects a shift in Australia's Pacific strategy from development-oriented engagement toward institutionalized security

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cooperation. The treaty functions not only as a bilateral defense arrangement but also as a mechanism for preserving Australia's regional leadership, strengthening institutional alignment with PNG, and limiting China's growing influence. The study concludes that the Pukpuk Treaty plays an important role in shaping regional security architecture and alignment dynamics in the Pacific. This study contributes to foreign policy and Indo-Pacific security studies by clarifying how defense diplomacy, bureaucratic interests, and strategic competition intersect in Australia's engagement with PNG.

Keywords: Australia–Papua New Guinea Relations; Pukpuk Treaty; Defense Diplomacy; Indo-Pacific Security; Regional Influence

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region has increasingly become one of the central arenas of geopolitical contestation in the twenty-first century. The intensification of strategic competition particularly between China and Western-aligned powers has transformed the Pacific Islands from a peripheral geopolitical space into a strategically contested region with significant implications for regional order, maritime security, and influence projection (Smith, 2023). China's expanding presence in the Pacific through infrastructure financing, security cooperation, digital connectivity projects, and diplomatic engagement has generated concerns among traditional regional actors, particularly Australia and the United States, regarding the shifting balance of power in the region (Zhang, 2023). This transformation has accelerated following China's security agreement with Solomon Islands in 2022, which signaled Beijing's growing willingness to institutionalize security influence within the Pacific Islands region (Klavins & Wroe, 2024). Consequently, the Pacific has increasingly been interpreted not merely as a development-oriented region, but also as a strategic theater of great-power competition.

Within this broader geopolitical environment, Papua New Guinea (PNG) occupies a particularly strategic position in Australia's foreign policy calculations. Geographically adjacent to northern Australia and historically connected through colonial administration, defense cooperation, and economic assistance, PNG has long functioned as a crucial component of Australia's regional security architecture (Wallis, 2021). However, China's growing political and economic engagement in PNG through infrastructure investment, development loans, telecommunications projects, and political diplomacy has challenged

Australia's long-standing dominance and influence in the country (B. Reilly, 2023). This development has generated strategic anxieties within Australian policymaking circles concerning the possibility of diminishing regional influence and the emergence of alternative security alignments in the Pacific. In response, Australia has increasingly recalibrated its Pacific policy orientation from a predominantly development-based engagement model toward a more security-oriented and strategic framework.

PNG's strategic behavior cannot be separated from its historical relationship with Australia. Prior to PNG's independence in 1975, Australia administered the territory under colonial arrangements that created long-term institutional, economic, and security linkages between the two countries. Following independence, PNG remained heavily dependent on Australian development assistance, administrative support, defense cooperation, and labor mobility opportunities. This historical dependency significantly shaped PNG's foreign policy orientation and security relations with Australia. Consequently, PNG's willingness to engage in deeper security cooperation through the Pukpuk Treaty was influenced not only by contemporary geopolitical pressures, but also by longstanding structural asymmetries and post-colonial institutional ties. Understanding these historical dimensions is important because it demonstrates that PNG is not merely a passive geopolitical arena, but a state whose strategic choices are shaped by both external competition and enduring historical dependency relationships.

One of the clearest manifestations of this recalibration of Australia Foreign Policy is the signing of the Pukpuk Treaty between Australia and Papua New Guinea in December 2023. Officially framed as a partnership aimed at strengthening regional stability, defense cooperation, maritime surveillance, policing capacity, and border security, the treaty reflects Australia's broader effort to reinforce its strategic presence in the Pacific (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023). The treaty named after the Tok Pisin term for "crocodile," symbolizing vigilance and protection has been publicly presented as a mutually beneficial framework grounded in shared regional interests and collective security commitments (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2024).

Beyond its literal meaning, the use of the term "Pukpuk" also carries important political and cultural symbolism within Papua New Guinea society. In many Melanesian communities, the crocodile represents strength, survival, authority, and ancestral identity. By adopting a Tok Pisin term deeply embedded in PNG cultural identity, Australia

attempted to frame the treaty as culturally respectful and partnership-oriented rather than externally imposed. This symbolic framing was politically significant because it sought to reduce sensitivities associated with Australia's historical dominance and colonial legacy in PNG. At the same time, the cultural symbolism of "Pukpuk" functioned as a diplomatic narrative designed to legitimize Australia's expanding security role in PNG by embedding the agreement within shared regional identity and local cultural references. Nevertheless, beyond its cooperative rhetoric, the treaty also illustrates Australia's strategic attempt to maintain regional influence amid China's expanding presence in the Pacific Islands. Thus, the Pukpuk Treaty cannot be understood solely as a bilateral security arrangement, but rather as a multidimensional foreign policy instrument combining strategic balancing, defense diplomacy, and identity-based regional positioning.

The growing strategic significance of the Pacific Islands has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years. Existing studies have primarily examined Australia's Pacific engagement through the perspectives of balance-of-power politics, strategic competition, and regional security management. Wallis (Wallis, 2023), for instance, argues that Australia's Pacific strategy is largely driven by concerns over maintaining regional security leadership amid China's expanding influence. Similarly, Reilly (2023) emphasizes the importance of identity narratives and Australia's self-perception as a Pacific nation in shaping Canberra's regional diplomacy. Meanwhile, Zhang (2023) highlights how China's economic and security expansion has altered regional strategic dynamics and intensified geopolitical rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. Other studies have also explored defense diplomacy as a mechanism for influence projection and alliance-building in the Pacific context (Cottey & Forster, 2004).

Although these studies provide important insights into the evolving strategic environment of the Pacific, several limitations remain evident. First, much of the existing literature focuses broadly on China–Australia rivalry without specifically examining the Pukpuk Treaty as a contemporary institutional instrument of Australian foreign policy toward Papua New Guinea. Second, previous research tends to analyze Australia's response either through structural realism and external balancing behavior or through normative and identity-based explanations separately, thereby overlooking the interaction between systemic pressures, domestic bureaucratic interests, and regional identity narratives. Third, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how defense diplomacy mechanisms are operationalized through bilateral security arrangements in ways

that simultaneously serve strategic, political, and symbolic objectives. As a result, the multidimensional nature of the Pukpuk Treaty remains underexplored within contemporary Indo-Pacific scholarship.

In addition, previous studies often treat Pacific security competition primarily as a macro-level geopolitical contest between Australia, China, and the United States, thereby overlooking how specific bilateral agreements operationalize strategic influence at the institutional level. Existing literature also tends to examine defense cooperation mainly in terms of military balancing or regional security management, with limited attention to how defense diplomacy simultaneously functions as a mechanism of political influence, institutional embedding, and identity construction. Furthermore, few studies specifically examine the interaction between geopolitical rivalry, domestic bureaucratic bargaining, and post-colonial regional narratives within a single analytical framework. As a result, the Pukpuk Treaty remains insufficiently analyzed as a multidimensional foreign policy instrument that reflects not only strategic balancing behavior, but also institutional power projection and regional identity politics in the contemporary Indo-Pacific context.

This study seeks to address the significance of the Pukpuk Treaty for Australia's regional influence in the pacific oceania by analyzing the Pukpuk Treaty through the theoretical lens of Neoclassical Realism, supported by the Bureaucratic Politics Model and the concept of Defense Diplomacy. Neoclassical Realism is particularly relevant because it enables an analysis that links external geopolitical pressures with domestic political perceptions and strategic interpretations (Schweller, 2003). In the context of the Pacific, Australia's response to China's growing influence cannot be fully understood solely through material power competition; rather, it is also shaped by institutional interests, bureaucratic bargaining, and identity construction regarding Australia's role as a regional stabilizer and member of the "Pacific Family." The Bureaucratic Politics Model further explains how foreign policy outcomes emerge through negotiation and competition among state institutions with differing priorities (Allison & Zelikow, 1999), while the concept of Defense Diplomacy illuminates how military cooperation functions as an instrument of long-term influence-building and strategic alignment (Cottey & Forster, 2004).

The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to conceptualize the Pukpuk Treaty not merely as a bilateral security agreement, but as an integrated foreign policy instrument shaped simultaneously by geopolitical rivalry, bureaucratic dynamics, and identity-based

regional strategy. Unlike previous studies that predominantly emphasize strategic balancing or security competition, this research integrates systemic, domestic, and ideational dimensions within a single analytical framework. Furthermore, the study contributes to contemporary Indo-Pacific scholarship by providing one of the earliest academic analyses of the Pukpuk Treaty as a recent strategic development in Pacific regional politics.

Therefore, this research aims to examine how Australia utilizes the Pukpuk Treaty as a foreign policy instrument toward Papua New Guinea amid intensifying geopolitical competition in the Pacific region. Specifically, this study investigates how strategic rivalry with China, domestic bureaucratic interests, and defense diplomacy mechanisms collectively shape Australia's contemporary foreign policy behavior in the Pacific Islands.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the Pukpuk Treaty as an instrument of Australia's foreign policy toward Papua New Guinea within the broader context of geopolitical competition in the Pacific region. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study seeks to understand meanings, strategic interpretations, political narratives, and institutional behavior underlying Australia's foreign policy decisions rather than measuring variables statistically (Aprila & Dwiharyadi, 2026). According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is suitable for exploring complex social and political phenomena that require contextual interpretation and in-depth understanding of actors, policies, and strategic interactions. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argue that qualitative research enables researchers to investigate political realities through interpretive and naturalistic approaches that emphasize meaning construction, institutional dynamics, and policy discourse. In the context of international relations and foreign policy analysis, qualitative methods are widely used to analyze strategic behavior, diplomatic narratives, and policy motivations that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone (Aprila et al., 2023).

The research design adopted in this study is a qualitative case study design. Yin (2018) explains that case study research is particularly appropriate when researchers aim to investigate contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The Pukpuk Treaty represents a contemporary geopolitical phenomenon closely connected to the evolving

strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific region; therefore, a case study design allows for a comprehensive and contextual analysis of the treaty's political, strategic, and diplomatic dimensions. This design is also suitable because the research focuses intensively on a single case namely Australia's foreign policy toward Papua New Guinea through the Pukpuk Treaty while connecting it to broader regional power dynamics. Compared to previous studies that generally analyzed Australia–China rivalry at the macro-regional level, this research specifically concentrates on the institutional and strategic dimensions of the Pukpuk Treaty as a recent bilateral security arrangement. Consequently, the study contributes a more focused and multidimensional understanding of Australia's contemporary Pacific strategy.

The population of this research consists of academic literature, policy documents, official government publications, strategic reports, and scholarly discussions related to Australia's foreign policy, China's influence in the Pacific Islands, defense diplomacy, and the Pukpuk Treaty. Given the qualitative nature of the research, the study does not employ statistical population measurement; instead, it applies purposive sampling to select relevant sources that directly address the research problem. Sugiyono (2024) and Perwita et al. (2022) defines purposive sampling as a sampling technique based on specific considerations and relevance to the objectives of the research. Accordingly, the selected samples include official documents from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), strategic assessments from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), academic journal articles discussing Indo-Pacific geopolitics, and scholarly works on Neoclassical Realism, Bureaucratic Politics, and Defense Diplomacy. The inclusion criteria for selecting data sources are: (1) relevance to Australia–Papua New Guinea relations; (2) discussion of Pacific geopolitical competition; (3) publication credibility through academic journals, government institutions, or recognized policy research institutes; and (4) publication within the period 2020–2025 to ensure contemporary relevance. This purposive approach enables the researcher to obtain data that are analytically significant and theoretically aligned with the objectives of the study.

The period of 2020–2025 was selected not only to ensure the contemporary relevance of the study, but also because it represents a critical phase in the intensification of geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific and Pacific regions. During this period, Australia experienced a significant shift in its Pacific strategy following the increasing expansion of China's diplomatic, economic, and security engagement with Pacific Island

countries. Major developments such as the growing Australia–China strategic rivalry, the announcement of the AUKUS partnership in 2021, China's security agreement with Solomon Islands in 2022, and the emergence of new regional security arrangements significantly influenced Australia's foreign policy orientation toward Papua New Guinea. Therefore, documents published within this timeframe are considered most relevant for capturing the evolving strategic context surrounding the formulation and implementation of the Pukpuk Treaty.

Data collection in this study primarily utilizes documentation techniques and literature review methods. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is an effective qualitative research method for systematically reviewing and interpreting written materials to gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge. The data sources include official policy statements, bilateral agreements, defense cooperation reports, parliamentary documents, government publications, academic journal articles, strategic policy papers, and reports from international research institutions. The documentation process was conducted by identifying, selecting, categorizing, and interpreting documents relevant to the research focus. To strengthen data credibility, the study applies source triangulation by comparing information derived from government publications, academic literature, and independent strategic assessments. Patton (2015) explains that triangulation enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative findings by cross-checking information from multiple sources. In addition, the researcher employs theoretical triangulation by integrating perspectives from Neoclassical Realism, Bureaucratic Politics, and Defense Diplomacy to avoid single-perspective bias in interpreting foreign policy behavior.

To strengthen data validity, the researcher distinguishes between political rhetoric and substantive policy content by examining the institutional origin, policy specificity, and operational detail of each document. Public speeches and political statements were analyzed primarily as representations of strategic narratives and identity construction, while official agreements, defense cooperation frameworks, budget allocations, parliamentary reports, and technical policy documents were treated as indicators of actual policy implementation and institutional commitment. The researcher also compared rhetorical statements with concrete policy actions, such as defense cooperation mechanisms, maritime coordination initiatives, and institutional arrangements contained within official bilateral documents. This approach allows the study to reduce interpretive bias and avoid

relying solely on symbolic political discourse in understanding Australia's strategic objectives.

The data analysis technique used in this study is qualitative thematic analysis supported by an interpretive approach to foreign policy analysis. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) explain that qualitative data analysis generally involves three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the first stage, the researcher systematically reduces and categorizes data related to strategic rivalry, bureaucratic dynamics, defense cooperation, and regional identity narratives. In the second stage, the categorized data are organized into thematic patterns to identify relationships between geopolitical competition, institutional interests, and foreign policy behavior. Finally, conclusions are drawn through interpretive analysis to explain how the Pukpuk Treaty functions as a multidimensional instrument of Australia's foreign policy. The analysis is conducted manually through systematic coding and thematic categorization of documents, policy statements, and scholarly sources. Furthermore, the study adopts an analytical framework based on Neoclassical Realism to connect systemic pressures with domestic political interpretation, while the Bureaucratic Politics Model and Defense Diplomacy concepts are used to explain institutional bargaining processes and strategic influence-building mechanisms. Through this analytical approach, the research seeks to produce a comprehensive understanding of Australia's strategic behavior in the Pacific region amid intensifying geopolitical competition.

The thematic coding process was conducted through several stages. First, the researcher performed open coding by identifying recurring concepts, strategic narratives, and policy patterns within the collected documents. Keywords and recurring issues such as "China's influence," "regional security," "Pacific stability," "bureaucratic coordination," and "defense cooperation" were initially identified and categorized. Second, axial coding was applied to connect related categories into broader analytical themes, including geopolitical competition with China, domestic bureaucratic dynamics, regional identity narratives, and defense diplomacy mechanisms. Finally, selective coding was conducted to integrate these themes into a coherent interpretation explaining how the Pukpuk Treaty functions as a multidimensional instrument of Australia's foreign policy. This step-by-step thematic process enabled the researcher to systematically interpret relationships between systemic pressure, institutional interests, and strategic behavior within the Indo-Pacific geopolitical context.

RESULTS

Australia's Strategic Recalibration of its Foreign Policy in The Pacific Region

The findings demonstrate that the Pukpuk Treaty represents a significant recalibration of Australia's foreign policy orientation toward Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the broader Pacific region. Historically, Australia's engagement with Pacific Island states relied heavily on development assistance, regional multilateralism, and economic cooperation. However, the empirical findings indicate that intensifying geopolitical competition particularly China's growing diplomatic and security presence in the Pacific has encouraged Australia to adopt a more security-centered regional strategy.

China's expanding influence became increasingly visible through infrastructure financing, digital connectivity projects, and security partnerships across Pacific Island states. The 2022 China–Solomon Islands Security Agreement constituted a major turning point in regional strategic dynamics because it signaled Beijing's willingness to institutionalize security cooperation in the Pacific. As a response, Australia intensified efforts to strengthen bilateral security cooperation with strategically significant Pacific partners, particularly Papua New Guinea.

Empirically, China's expanding presence in Papua New Guinea became increasingly visible through large-scale infrastructure financing, resource investments, and strategic cooperation projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China funded and constructed several major projects in PNG, including road infrastructure, port development, telecommunications networks, and energy facilities. Chinese companies such as Huawei also became involved in digital connectivity and telecommunications development within PNG, raising concerns in Australia regarding cybersecurity and strategic dependence. In addition, China significantly increased its trade and investment engagement with PNG, particularly in the mining, fisheries, and energy sectors. According to Lowy Institute and Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) reports, China emerged as one of PNG's major economic partners during the 2020–2025 period, while Beijing also expanded diplomatic engagement and security dialogue with Pacific Island governments. For Australian policymakers, these developments created concerns that China's growing economic influence could eventually translate into long-term strategic and security access within the Pacific region. Consequently, Australia perceived the strengthening of institutional security cooperation with PNG through the Pukpuk Treaty as strategically

necessary to preserve its regional influence and prevent potential shifts in geopolitical alignment.

Papua New Guinea occupies a critical geopolitical position within Australia's regional security architecture due to its geographical proximity, maritime significance, and historical ties with Australia. The findings reveal that Australia perceives PNG not only as a neighboring state but also as a strategic buffer essential for maintaining stability along Australia's northern approaches. Consequently, the Pukpuk Treaty emerged as a strategic mechanism to reinforce Australia's influence and institutional presence within PNG's security sector. Table 1 presents the principal strategic drivers underlying the establishment of the Pukpuk Treaty.



Figure 1. Map of PNG and Australia
Source: Researchgate,2017

Table 1. Strategic Drivers of the Pukpuk Treaty

Strategic Driver	Empirical Evidence	Foreign Policy Implication
China's Regional Expansion	China expanded diplomatic, economic, and security engagement in Pacific Island states, including the Solomon Islands Security Agreement in 2022.	Australia intensified security cooperation with PNG to maintain regional influence and strategic positioning.
PNG Domestic Security	PNG faces tribal conflict, maritime border vulnerability, and institutional security	Australia positioned itself as PNG's principal security and defense

Strategic Driver	Empirical Evidence	Foreign Policy Implication
Challenges	limitations.	partner.
Australia's Regional Identity	Australia consistently framed itself as part of the "Pacific Family" and regional stabilizer.	The treaty was presented as partnership-oriented rather than coercive strategic alignment.

Processed by the authors, 2026

The findings indicate that the treaty was not solely motivated by conventional security concerns, but also by Australia's broader strategic objective of preserving regional leadership amid intensifying great-power competition in the Pacific.

From the Papua New Guinea perspective, perceptions toward the Pukpuk Treaty appear more complex and nuanced. Several PNG political elites viewed the agreement positively because it provides security assistance, maritime surveillance support, institutional training, and financial resources necessary to address domestic security challenges and limited state capacity. For the PNG government, cooperation with Australia was often framed as a pragmatic partnership aimed at strengthening national security institutions and improving border management capabilities. However, the findings also indicate the existence of critical perspectives within PNG political and public discourse. Some observers and civil society actors expressed concerns that deepening Australian involvement in PNG's security sector could reinforce asymmetric dependency and reproduce neo-colonial patterns of influence rooted in the historical relationship between the two countries. Critics argued that institutional embedding through advisory support and operational coordination may potentially reduce PNG's strategic autonomy in managing its own security affairs. These differing perceptions demonstrate that the Pukpuk Treaty is not viewed solely as a security partnership, but also as part of a broader contestation over sovereignty, regional influence, and post-colonial relations in the Pacific.

Institutional Design and Strategic Structure of the Pukpuk Treaty

The empirical findings further reveal that the Pukpuk Treaty was designed as a comprehensive security and defense partnership emphasizing long-term institutional cooperation rather than direct military deployment. The treaty includes multiple forms of cooperation, such as joint military training, maritime surveillance coordination, law

enforcement support, intelligence collaboration, cyber cooperation, and humanitarian assistance mechanisms.

The findings show that Australia deliberately structured the treaty around capacity-building and interoperability mechanisms instead of establishing overt military dominance within PNG. This institutional design reflects Australia's effort to maintain strategic influence while simultaneously minimizing perceptions of neo-colonial intervention in the Pacific region. Figure 1 illustrates the strategic escalation that contributed to the formation of the Pukpuk Treaty.

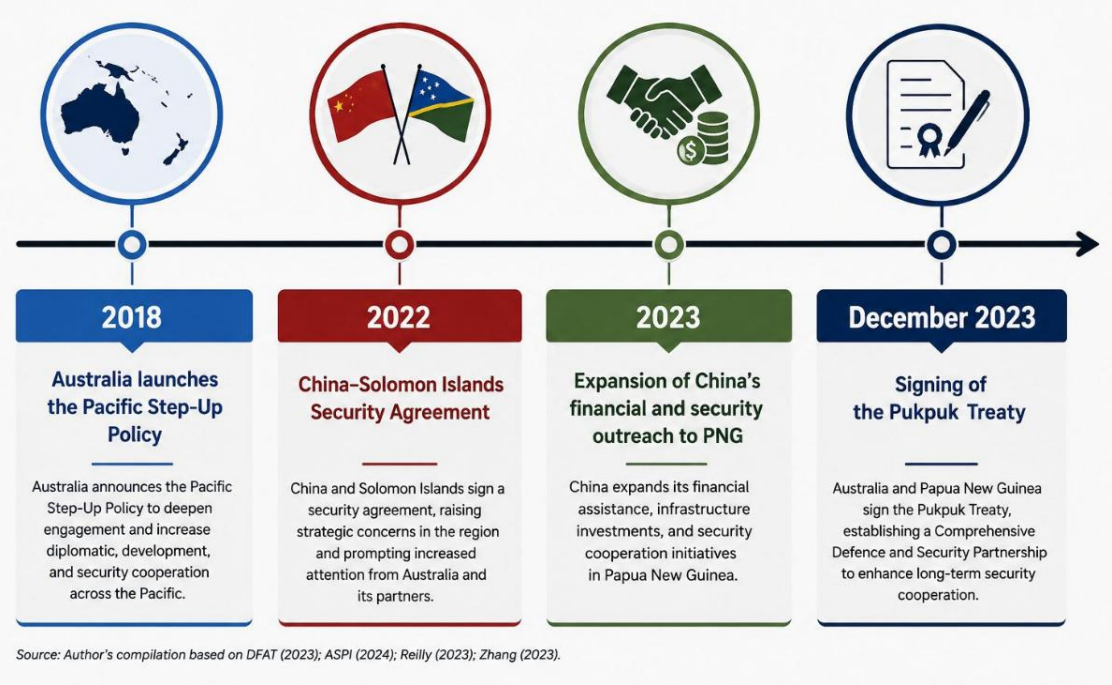


Figure 2. Timeline of Strategic Escalation in the Pacific Region
Processed by the authors,2026

The findings demonstrate that the treaty's institutional structure enables Australia to sustain long-term strategic access and influence within PNG's security architecture through embedded cooperation mechanisms. Instead of deploying large military contingents, Australia utilizes advisory teams, institutional coordination frameworks, and operational training programs integrated into PNG's security institutions.

Bureaucratic Dynamics in the Formulation of the Treaty

The research findings indicate that the formulation of the Pukpuk Treaty involved significant interaction among multiple Australian state institutions with differing strategic priorities. The empirical evidence suggests that the final structure of the treaty represents a

negotiated outcome between diplomatic, defense, and executive institutions(Schweller, 2003).

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) prioritized diplomatic legitimacy, regional sensitivity, and partnership-based language to avoid perceptions of Australian dominance in PNG. In contrast, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) focused primarily on operational interoperability, maritime coordination, and strategic access to regional security infrastructure. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister's Office emphasized strategic signaling and Australia's leadership role in maintaining regional order amid growing geopolitical rivalry. Table 2 summarizes the institutional actors and their respective strategic priorities.

Table 2. Bureaucratic Actors and Strategic Priorities in the Pukpuk Treaty

Institutional Actor	Strategic Priority	Influence on Treaty Design
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)	Diplomatic legitimacy and regional partnership	Emphasized sovereignty, cooperation, and non-coercive language
Australian Defence Force (ADF)	Security interoperability and maritime coordination	Promoted embedded advisory teams and operational cooperation
Prime Minister's Office	Regional leadership and strategic signaling	Positioned the treaty as part of Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy

Processed by the authors,2026

The findings reveal that bureaucratic compromise significantly shaped the final form of the treaty. Although security objectives remained central, diplomatic institutions ensured that the treaty maintained a cooperative and partnership-oriented narrative. This explains why the agreement emphasizes advisory cooperation and institutional support rather than permanent military deployment.

Defense Diplomacy as an Instrument of Strategic Influence

The findings demonstrate that defense diplomacy constitutes the central operational mechanism of the Pukpuk Treaty. Rather than relying on coercive military presence, Australia employed defense cooperation as a long-term influence-building strategy designed to strengthen alignment with PNG (Zhang, 2023).

Empirical evidence indicates that Australia implemented defense diplomacy through embedded advisory teams, maritime surveillance cooperation, institutional training programs, intelligence sharing, and joint operational coordination. These activities

contributed to the development of interoperability between Australian and Papua New Guinean security institutions.

The findings further reveal that defense diplomacy serves two interconnected strategic functions. First, it enhances PNG's institutional security capacity in areas such as maritime surveillance, border security, and internal stability management. Second, it enables Australia to maintain sustained strategic influence within PNG's security architecture by embedding Australian operational standards, training systems, and institutional coordination mechanisms Pacific (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023).

As a consequence, Australia strengthens its position as PNG's most operationally integrated security partner. This institutional embeddedness simultaneously reduces the attractiveness of alternative security partnerships, particularly those involving China. Therefore, the findings suggest that defense diplomacy functions not merely as security cooperation, but as a strategic instrument for shaping long-term regional alignment in the Pacific.

Regional Implications of the Pukpuk Treaty

The findings indicate that the implications of the Pukpuk Treaty extend beyond bilateral Australia–Papua New Guinea relations and significantly affect broader Pacific regional dynamics. The treaty signals Australia's renewed commitment to maintaining its role as the principal security actor within the Pacific region.

Empirical evidence suggests that the treaty contributes to the redefinition of Pacific security norms, where defense cooperation and institutional security partnerships increasingly become central components of regional order. This development reflects a broader transformation in the Pacific strategic environment from predominantly development-oriented regionalism toward security-centered geopolitical competition Pacific (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023).

The findings also demonstrate that Pacific Island states increasingly face strategic alignment pressures amid intensifying rivalry between Australia and China. For countries such as Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Vanuatu, security cooperation now carries broader geopolitical implications related to long-term strategic orientation and external influence.

At the regional level, the Pukpuk Treaty strengthens Australia's strategic presence while simultaneously functioning as a counterbalance to China's expanding regional

influence. Consequently, the treaty contributes to shaping emerging alignment patterns and security architecture within the Indo-Pacific region.

Nevertheless, the treaty also illustrates the growing dilemma faced by Pacific Island states amid intensifying geopolitical competition between major powers. While security cooperation with Australia offers institutional and financial benefits, closer alignment with one external actor may simultaneously reduce strategic flexibility for smaller Pacific states. This condition reflects the increasingly competitive nature of Indo-Pacific regional order, where development assistance, security cooperation, and defense diplomacy are closely interconnected with broader geopolitical rivalry.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Pukpuk Treaty functions as a multidimensional foreign policy instrument through which Australia seeks to preserve strategic influence in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the broader Pacific region amid intensifying geopolitical competition. The results indicate that Australia's foreign policy recalibration was primarily driven by the perception that China's expanding diplomatic and security engagement in the Pacific represented a strategic challenge to regional stability and Australia's long-standing influence.

The findings further reveal that Australia's response was not limited to conventional military balancing. Instead, Australia employed institutionalized security cooperation mechanisms through the Pukpuk Treaty to strengthen long-term strategic alignment with PNG. This included maritime coordination, embedded advisory cooperation, institutional interoperability, intelligence collaboration, and defense capacity-building programs. The treaty therefore illustrates how Australia utilized defense diplomacy to reinforce strategic partnerships while simultaneously minimizing perceptions of coercive intervention.

In relation to the research objectives, the study confirms that the Pukpuk Treaty serves not only as a bilateral security arrangement but also as a strategic mechanism designed to shape regional alignment patterns within the Indo-Pacific. The findings indicate that Australia attempted to maintain regional leadership by combining security cooperation, diplomatic legitimacy, and identity-based regional narratives. Consequently,

the treaty reflects the interaction between external geopolitical pressure, domestic strategic interpretation, and institutional policy coordination.

The findings also demonstrate that bureaucratic dynamics played an important role in shaping the final form of the treaty. Different Australian institutions pursued distinct priorities during the formulation process. DFAT prioritized diplomatic legitimacy and regional sensitivity, while the Australian Defence Force emphasized interoperability and operational coordination. At the same time, executive political actors framed the treaty as part of Australia's broader Indo-Pacific strategic posture. The final institutional design of the treaty therefore emerged through compromise between security ambition and diplomatic caution.

The findings of this study are generally consistent with previous scholarship emphasizing the growing strategic competition between Australia and China in the Pacific region. Wallis (2023) argues that Australia's Pacific engagement increasingly reflects concerns regarding regional security and influence preservation amid China's expanding presence. Similarly, Zhang (2023) highlights how China's security and infrastructure initiatives in the Pacific have intensified geopolitical rivalry and altered regional strategic dynamics. The present study supports these arguments by demonstrating that the Pukpuk Treaty emerged largely as a response to perceived strategic vulnerability created by China's growing regional influence.

The findings also align with Reilly's (2023) argument that Australia's Pacific policy is shaped not only by material strategic interests but also by identity narratives positioning Australia as a regional steward within the "Pacific Family." This study similarly finds that Australia framed the Pukpuk Treaty through partnership-oriented discourse emphasizing cooperation, sovereignty, and regional stability rather than overt strategic containment.

However, this study extends previous literature in several important ways. Existing studies generally examine Australia–China rivalry at the macro-regional level without specifically analyzing the Pukpuk Treaty as a contemporary institutional instrument of Australian foreign policy toward PNG. Furthermore, prior research tends to focus either on structural geopolitical competition or identity-based regional narratives separately. In contrast, this study integrates Neoclassical Realism, Bureaucratic Politics, and Defense Diplomacy within a single analytical framework to explain how systemic pressure, institutional bargaining, and strategic influence-building simultaneously shaped the treaty.

The findings additionally contribute to defense diplomacy literature by demonstrating that contemporary security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific increasingly operates through embedded institutional mechanisms rather than direct military projection. This finding supports Winger's (2014) argument that defense diplomacy allows states to project influence through long-term institutional alignment and partnership-building rather than coercive force.

The findings of this study contribute both theoretically and practically to the field of international relations and foreign policy analysis. Theoretically, the study strengthens the explanatory relevance of Neoclassical Realism in understanding middle-power behavior within contemporary geopolitical competition. The findings demonstrate that foreign policy responses cannot be explained solely through systemic power distribution, but must also account for domestic interpretation, identity narratives, and institutional dynamics. By integrating Neoclassical Realism with the Bureaucratic Politics Model and Defense Diplomacy, this study provides a more multidimensional framework for analyzing contemporary foreign policy behavior in contested regional environments.

The study also contributes to the growing scholarship on Indo-Pacific geopolitics by highlighting how defense diplomacy functions as a strategic instrument for maintaining influence and shaping regional alignment. In the context of increasing strategic rivalry, security cooperation is no longer limited to traditional military alliances, but increasingly involves institutional embedding, interoperability, and long-term strategic dependence.

Practically, the findings suggest that Australia's regional strategy increasingly prioritizes institutionalized security partnerships as a means of preserving influence within the Pacific. For Pacific Island states, the findings indicate that security cooperation now carries broader geopolitical implications related to strategic alignment and regional order formation. The study therefore highlights how bilateral security agreements such as the Pukpuk Treaty may influence future regional security architecture and alignment dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that middle powers increasingly rely on defense diplomacy and institutional cooperation to manage geopolitical competition without provoking direct confrontation. This has broader implications for understanding how states navigate strategic rivalry within regions characterized by overlapping security, economic, and political interests.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research relies primarily on qualitative document analysis using official government publications, policy reports, and academic literature. As a result, the study depends significantly on publicly available information, which may limit access to confidential strategic considerations and internal policymaking processes related to the Pukpuk Treaty.

Second, the study focuses specifically on Australia's foreign policy perspective and institutional behavior, while domestic political dynamics within Papua New Guinea are discussed only insofar as they relate directly to bilateral security cooperation. Consequently, the study does not comprehensively examine internal PNG political contestation, elite perceptions, or societal responses toward the treaty.

Third, because the Pukpuk Treaty is a relatively recent geopolitical development, the long-term effectiveness and strategic consequences of the treaty cannot yet be fully assessed. Future research may therefore examine the operational implementation of the treaty, its long-term regional impact, and the responses of other Pacific Island states toward evolving Australia–China competition in the Pacific.

Finally, the study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach emphasizing strategic narratives, institutional dynamics, and geopolitical interpretation. While this approach enables in-depth contextual analysis, it may also contain interpretive subjectivity inherent in qualitative foreign policy research. Nevertheless, source triangulation and theoretical triangulation were employed to strengthen analytical credibility and minimize interpretive bias.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Pukpuk Treaty represents a significant recalibration of Australia's foreign policy toward Papua New Guinea (PNG) amid intensifying geopolitical competition in the Pacific region. The findings demonstrate that Australia's strategic response was driven not only by concerns over China's expanding diplomatic and security presence, but also by Australia's broader objective of preserving regional leadership and maintaining long-term strategic influence in the Pacific. Through the Pukpuk Treaty, Australia institutionalized long-term security cooperation with PNG through defense diplomacy mechanisms such as maritime coordination, embedded advisory support, institutional interoperability, and security capacity-building. Consequently, the treaty

functions not merely as a bilateral security agreement, but as a multidimensional foreign policy instrument that combines strategic balancing, institutional influence-building, and regional identity construction.

The study further finds that the formulation and implementation of the treaty were shaped by the interaction between external geopolitical pressure, domestic bureaucratic dynamics, and Australia's identity narrative as a regional stabilizer within the "Pacific Family." These findings demonstrate that middle powers increasingly rely on institutionalized defense diplomacy and long-term security partnerships to maintain influence without overt coercion or direct military projection. At the regional level, the treaty contributes to the transformation of Pacific security norms, where security cooperation is increasingly linked to geopolitical alignment and strategic competition among major powers.

Theoretically, this study strengthens and extends Neoclassical Realism by demonstrating that middle-power foreign policy behavior cannot be explained solely through systemic pressure and material power considerations. Instead, the findings show that domestic bureaucratic interests, institutional bargaining, and identity narratives significantly shape how states translate external threats into strategic policy responses. In addition, this study contributes to the concept of Defense Diplomacy by showing that defense cooperation is no longer limited to confidence-building measures or military engagement, but also functions as a strategic instrument for institutional influence-building and geopolitical alignment within contested regional environments. By integrating Neoclassical Realism, the Bureaucratic Politics Model, and Defense Diplomacy into a single analytical framework, this study offers a more comprehensive explanation of how contemporary middle powers manage regional competition through institutionalized security arrangements.

Practically, the findings highlight that the Pukpuk Treaty may contribute both to regional stability and strategic polarization in the Pacific. On one hand, the treaty strengthens security coordination, maritime governance, and disaster-response capacity between Australia and PNG. On the other hand, it may intensify strategic alignment dynamics and deepen geopolitical rivalry between Australia and China in the region. For Indonesia, the growing institutionalization of security cooperation in the Pacific has important implications for its strategic position in the Western Pacific and eastern maritime

frontier. As geopolitical competition increasingly expands into the South Pacific, Indonesia may face greater pressure to strengthen its own defense diplomacy, maritime cooperation, and regional engagement with Pacific Island states in order to maintain strategic relevance and regional stability.

Nevertheless, this study remains limited by its reliance on publicly accessible policy documents and secondary strategic assessments, which restrict access to confidential policymaking processes and internal diplomatic negotiations. Furthermore, because the Pukpuk Treaty is a relatively recent development, its long-term strategic effectiveness and regional consequences cannot yet be comprehensively evaluated. Future research is therefore recommended to examine the operational implementation of the treaty, the responses of Pacific Island states toward evolving Australia–China competition, and the long-term implications of defense diplomacy for regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. Comparative studies involving other Pacific Island states such as Solomon Islands, Fiji, or Vanuatu may also provide broader insight into changing regional alignment dynamics amid intensifying geopolitical rivalry.

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