Sport as Strategy

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The Australia–Papua New Guinea Bilateral Security Agreement, signed in December 2024 as part of Australia's Pacific Step-Up Strategy, has found an unlikely diplomatic and cultural vehicle as its fulcrum for success, intertwining hard power with an unassuming but deeply resonant tool of soft power: Rugby League. As an island continent often caught between its vast geography and its perceived precarious strategic position, Australia has always approached its foreign policy with a sense of anxious pragmatism, opting to pair itself alongside far larger powers in the region. However, in the South Pacific, its immediate neighbourhood, Canberra has embraced a uniquely idiosyncratic style of diplomacy with Pacific nations, blending

traditional security arrangements with cultural engagement to maintain its traditional sphere of influence.

In Papua New Guinea, Rugby League is not just a sport; it is a national passion, bordering on quasi-religious significance. It unites a fragmented society, offering a rare sense of shared identity in a country marked by geographic and cultural diversity, and one in which over 800 languages are spoken. For Australia, this provides an opportunity. The proposal to establish a Papua New Guinea National Rugby League team by 2028, backed by an estimated $600 million in Australian funding, is not merely about fostering sport; It is a calculated move to strengthen ties with Papua New Guinea, thereby embedding Australia's influence into the cultural fabric of its northern neighbour.

Yet this investment is more than a feel-good gesture. By tying Australian funding to transparent and accountable development, Canberra offers a stark contrast to China's opaque financial practices in the region. Beijing's "dark money"—unconditional infrastructure loans with ambiguous terms—has raised alarms about debt dependency and strategic coercion. Through Rugby League, Australia aims to position itself as a partner aligned with Papua New Guinea's aspirations, rather than a power exerting economic leverage, after a decade of diplomatic neglect.

The Bilateral Security Agreement formalizes Australia and Papua New Guinea's shared commitment to addressing critical security challenges. From transnational crime and maritime surveillance to intelligence sharing and border management, the agreement represents a significant deepening of the bilateral relationship. Australia's pledge of $1.5 billion in development assistance over five years signals a long-term commitment, not just to defence cooperation but to the broader stability of Papua New Guinea's political and economic institutions.

Viewed through the lens of geopolitical competition, the Bilateral Security Agreement is a bulwark against China's expanding influence in the South Pacific. Beijing's recent infrastructure investments, amounting to over $2.3 billion across the region, have generated significant unease in Canberra. Papua New Guinea, as the largest Pacific Island nation, is a critical piece of the puzzle. For Australia, ensuring Papua New Guinea remains aligned with Western security architectures is paramount.

In all this, China's ambitions in the South Pacific are unmistakable. The Solomon Islands' recent security pact with Beijing and the proliferation of Chinese-funded infrastructure projects across the region underscore the intensity of this strategic contest. Australia's response has been twofold: assert its presence through formal agreements like the Bilateral Security Pact, while simultaneously nurturing cultural and economic partnerships that resonate at a grassroots level.

The Rugby League initiative epitomizes this dual approach. By leveraging Papua New Guinea's passion for the sport, Australia aims to create a sense of shared identity and mutual investment that infrastructure deals alone

cannot achieve. While China builds roads and ports, Australia aims to build trust—a strategy grounded in cultural diplomacy and historical ties.

However, Australia's strategy in Papua New Guinea is not without its challenges. PNG faces significant governance issues, economic disparities, and localized instability, all of which make it a fertile ground for external interference. Additionally, the use of Rugby League as a diplomatic tool, while innovative, risks being seen as superficial if not supported by substantive development and capacity-building efforts. Sporting partnerships alone cannot bear the burden of genuine regional co-operation and must be paired with material outcomes, not just for governments, but their people too.

This approach also reflects a historical recalibration. Australia's post-colonial ties to Papua New Guinea, once paternalistic, are now evolving into a partnership grounded in shared interests and mutual respect—a recognition that the region's stability depends on empowering its nations rather than exploiting them.

In the shadow of China's economic juggernaut, Australia's strategy may seem modest. Yet it is precisely this modesty—rooted in cultural connectivity and shared passions —that gives it its strength. In a region where shared identity often outweighs sheer power, Australia's Rugby League diplomacy may prove to be a winning play, ensuring that the Pacific remains a sphere of partnership rather than contention and coercion.