

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

# 'INDIA CAN PROVIDE CAPITAL, TECHNOLOGY TO HARNESS BOUGAINVILLE'S RESOURCES'

'For the past few decades, the United States has beaten a gradual retreat from the South Pacific. Given the aggressive manoeuvres of China in the region, that path must obviously be reversed.'

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Within the next few months, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to visit Papua New Guinea (PNG). It will be a first for an Indian Prime Minister and the visit is keenly anticipated in the country of around 9 million people.

A determining issue in the future of PNG is the country's relationship with the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. In this edition of "Indo-Pacific: Behind the Headlines", we spoke with John D. Kuhns, who has lived and worked in Bougainville since 2015 and is the author of "They Call Me Ishmael", a novel about Bougainville President Ishmael Toroama.

**Q: What's going on in Bougainville now?**

**A:** Until recently, those who were familiar with Bougainville knew it as a South Pacific archipelago ravaged by "The Crisis", the term Bougainvilleans use to describe the civil war with their parent government Papua New Guinea (PNG) that took place from 1989 to 1998. In this brutal conflagration—the most destructive in the Pacific region since World War II—approximately 20,000 Bougainvilleans died.

Bougainville's booming economy, the most prosperous of any region in PNG at the time due to the huge Panguna Mine, collapsed and lay in ruins.

It has taken a while, but those who visit Bougainville

today might notice a whiff of optimism in the air emanating from the heady elixir of independence.

The Crisis ended with the signing of the Bougainville Peace Agreement in 2001, in which Bougainville remained part of PNG as an autonomous region with its own Constitution but was granted the right within 20 years to conduct an independence referendum.

In December 2019, the referendum took place. 97.7% of registered Bougainvilleans chose independence over staying part of PNG. The event was transformational. For the first time, people stopped identifying themselves by their villages; now, they are more likely to think of themselves as Bougainvilleans.

Paying for independence will be expensive and difficult, but not impossible. Unlike many South Pacific comparables, Bougainville is richly endowed with resources.

The Panguna Mine, which operated from 1972 until 1989 and today remains closed, still contains copper, gold, and silver ore worth over \$100 billion. It is only one of several areas of potentially promising mineral deposits in Bougainville. The land also hosts significant gardens of coconut palms, cacao trees, and forests of exotic hardwoods. Bougainville's waters teem with fish.

However, Bougainville has been slow to emerge from the fog of war. To rebuild, Bougainvilleans need all the help they can get.

**Q: What is the current situation/timeline in regards to Bougainville independence?**

**A:** The results of the December 2019 independence referendum are not binding on PNG. According to the Bougainville Peace Agreement, the members of PNG's Parliament have the right to approve, or disapprove, Bougainville's decision to leave PNG.

Sentiments as to how PNG's members will vote are wide-ranging. "Let them go," the man on the street is likely to say, while some Members of Parliament blaviate more political statements.

The respective leaders of the two governments—Ishmael Toroama, the President of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville and James Marape, the Prime Minister of PNG—have met every 90 days in what are called Joint Supervisory Board meetings supervised by United Nations advisors to negotiate the arrangements.

Toroama has gone on record that he wants Bougainville to be independent by September 2025, while Marape has indicated that if his Parliament were to approve independence, 2027 is a more reasonable timeframe.

**Q: What is popular sentiment towards independence/what are likely outcomes if independence is not achieved?**

**A:** Toroama's presidential campaign in 2020 was squarely based on independence. Given that winning campaign platform and the people's overwhelmingly affirmative response to the independence referendum, his position is clear.

Furthermore, Toroama was the guerilla leader of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, the rebel militia that in The Crisis fought the better-manned and equipped PNG Defence Force to a standstill and forced the PNG government to collapse. To do so again would be gruelling, but nothing that he and his combatants have not done before.

As for Marape, his situation today is far different that the dilemma faced by the leaders of PNG during The Crisis. Losing Bougainville and the vast wealth of the Panguna Mine would not produce the crippling loss that such an outcome represented in pre-Crisis days.

In 1989, when The Crisis



John D. Kuhns

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erupted, the Panguna Mine was the main engine of PNG's GDP and produced approximately one quarter of the nation's foreign exchange. Even though the fallout of The Crisis threatened to bring down the PNG government, the inexperienced leaders (they had only been an independent nation

for 14 years) had little choice. They needed to reopen the Panguna Mine, even if it meant war.

Today, with the advent of many more precious mineral mines and significant oil and gas development in PNG, even if the Panguna Mine were operating full blast it wouldn't make a dou-

ble-digit impact on PNG's economy.

Some say that economics isn't the issue with Bougainville's pending departure; it's politics. PNG was formed from an amalgam of peoples and cultures on its mainland, together with disparate groups from its far-flung islands—New Britain, New Ireland, and many more—that were glued together in a potentially shaky structure. If Bougainville were to depart, others might follow.

That concern may be worth consideration, but history reveals little evidence of loud pleadings for independence from PNG by the peoples of other PNG provinces.

The same cannot be said for Bougainvilleans; it has pervaded the archipelago's persona for over a century. Passed around between colonial powers eager to harvest its resources, Bougainvilleans were first told they "belonged" to Germany, then after World War I to Australia pursuant to a United Nations mandate, then subjugated by Japan, and at the end of World War II found themselves again part of Australia and incorporated into the Territory of PNG.

When it was announced in 1970 that PNG—including Bougainville—would become the Independent State of Papua New Guinea, Bougainvilleans felt nonplussed; they had not been consulted in a meaningful way.

While both PNG and Bougainville are Melanesian cultures, there are significant differences between them.

Also, Bougainville may be a political unit of PNG, but geographically it is part of the Solomon Islands. In the 1970s, the Solomon Islands were also gaining their independence. In the minds of many Bougainvilleans, it seemed as good a time as any to strike out on their own. In 1975, as the deadline of the PNG independence deal

loomed, a team of Bougainvilleans flew to New York City to petition the United Nations for their freedom.

One wonders about the irritation the players managing the South Pacific chessboard at the time—Australia, Great Britain, and the United Nations, no doubt, with the not-yet-prodigious United States a shadow observer in the background—felt about the futile thrashings of the Bougainvillean parvenus.

In any event, independence was not to be. The UN sent them home unfulfilled. But the flame had been lit. It smoldered for decades, and now burns bright.

**Q: How are relations with China/Australia/US?**

**A:** Watching Australia spend hundreds of millions more on PNG than when it was a territory (on things that one can't see like medicine and schoolbooks), one is struck by the uncomfortable sense that PNG expects nothing less.

Meanwhile, China is investing large amounts as well, but its cash is being spent on attention-getting infrastructure. China rebuilt a significant portion of downtown Port Moresby, PNG's capital city, for APEC 2018, where Xi Jinping was the keynote speaker (a first for a Chinese leader). It has also rebuilt the main highway from the airport to Lae, PNG's largest industrial city, and is now busy constructing a brand-new airport terminal there.

On the other hand, China has, so far, not been able to gain a foothold in Bougainville. That result has not been for lack of trying. However, Bougainville's Constitution is a strong impediment. It says that the land and all of its resources belong to Bougainville's individual landowners, not the government. Paying off venal government officials doesn't get foreigners very far.

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a gradual retreat from the South Pacific. Given the aggressive manoeuvres of China in the region, that path must obviously be reversed.

**Q: What role is Indonesia playing?**

**A:** Indonesia could only play a role in mainland PNG if PNG continues to flounder. And flounder it has. Recently, the government has been evicted from many of its offices in Port Moresby due to years of non-payment of back rent.

PNG Power, the government-owned electric utility, is functionally insolvent. Due to anecdotal evidence like this, there is always speculation about the collapse of PNG and the potential of Indonesia sidling in from the western half of New Guinea.

However, the same issues that make it difficult for the PNG government to manage problems across its fractious nation should surely dissuade a foreign power with a wholly different culture from invading.

**Q: How could India contribute to security, stability and prosperity?**

**A:** Certainly, Bougainville needs the normal items that one sees aid organizations contribute: medicine; school books; and computers.

While much needed and welcome, those items will not have enough impact in a place that must lever its entire economy upward quickly to join the twenty-first century. To do so, Bougainville needs major economic development, the kind only industrial nations with skilled infrastructure industries—like India—can provide.

Bougainville has the resources to be harnessed. If India, like Bougainville a democracy, could provide the capital, technology, and training to harness these resources, Bougainville could, with the assistance of a compatible partner, easily become a South Pacific outlier.

UK-NORTHERN IRELAND

## PM Sunak solves one of the biggest problems facing the UK

PM Rishi Sunak's diplomacy has brought about a much needed thaw in relations between the UK and the EU.

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Ever since he became the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak has hardly put a foot wrong. Some sections of the British media have been trying very hard to portray him as a failure. Not having much luck in their endeavours, they have adopted a different approach, which is to ignore him. Most of the media including the BBC failed to highlight Rishi's confident, professional and articulate persona both inside and

outside of Parliament. His youthful looks camouflage a very sharp, intelligent and a pragmatic individual. He has been quietly stamping his authority on the vision he has for the country. One of the biggest problems facing the country after leaving the European Union was to resolve the contentious issue of Northern Ireland. For those who are unfamiliar with the history of Northern Ireland, a little introduction is necessary. Northern Ireland has two big communities made up of Catholics and Protestants. The Catholics want to merge with Ireland and the Protestants are vehemently opposed to the idea. They want to remain a part of the United Kingdom. Massive violence has taken place between these communities over the last three decades.

As part of the Brexit withdrawal agreement, a

Northern Ireland Protocol was signed between the UK and EU. This meant that goods from mainland UK to Northern Ireland would need customs clearance. This massively increased the red tape. There are 500 pieces of legislation that apply to Northern Ireland but do not apply to the rest of the UK. The Protocol was opposed by the Unionists because they saw it as undermining Northern Ireland's position within the UK. The Democratic Unionist Party in February 2022 withdrew from the Northern Ireland assembly in Stormont. The assembly has since been suspended. It is the ministers and civil servants who are managing the affairs of Northern Ireland now. This political vacuum has the potential to reignite past troubles. It was a matter of urgency to tackle this matter. There was an added



UK PM Rishi Sunak

urgency as on 15 June 2022 the European Union took legal action against the UK for not keeping to the Protocol.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak started to focus on the issue taking advantage of a

parliamentary break when MPs were away. He engaged with Northern Ireland business leaders. They found him encouraging and impressive. He had intense negotiations with the EU presi-

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dent Ursula Von der Leyen. Rishi's proposal is to create green and red lanes. The green lanes would remove all checks and customs controls as well as security and safety certificates for goods going to Northern Ireland from the mainland UK. The red lane would be for goods going on to Ireland and the rest of the Europe. These would have to go full checks and customs controls. The agreement will mean that for the first time since Brexit, UK Parliament will be able to set the Northern Ireland VAT and spell

out the state aid policy.

A joint statement by PM Rishi Sunak and EU president Ursula Von der Leyen on Monday 27 February 2023 spelled out the resolution of the dispute. The EU president referred to PM Rishi Sunak as, "Dear Rishi", which is a compliment to Rishi and his ability to win hearts and minds.

The agreement was welcomed by the former Prime Minister Theresa May and the leader of the Labour Party, Keir Starmer. The Northern Ireland minister

and hardline Brexiteer Steve Baker said: "The PM is on the cusp of securing a really fantastic result for everyone involved." The Democratic Unionist Party is studying the agreement closely and it will be under pressure from the business leaders to accept the same quickly.

PM Rishi Sunak's diplomacy has brought about a much needed thaw in relations between the UK and the EU. It might pave the way to resolving other issues. In contrast former PM Boris Johnson wanted to tear up the Northern Ireland Protocol unilaterally. This was certain to lead towards a trade war between the UK and EU. Rishi Sunak has proved himself to be an able leader whose stature is bound to rise on the world stage.

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