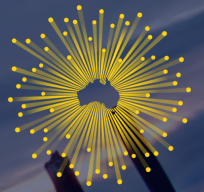


YOUNG AUSTRALIANS in
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



REORIENTING AUSTRALIA'S APPROACH TO THE WEST PAPUA CONFLICT

POLICY BRIEF - HENRY HERITAGE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ongoing conflict between the Indonesian Government and West Papuan independence groups over the military and legal subjugation of West Papua has sustained multifaceted breaches of land and human rights of the indigenous Papuan people. This presents a challenge for Australia as it attempts to maintain both a geopolitical leadership role in the South Pacific and a stable strategic relationship with Indonesia. This has led to an ongoing reluctance to conduct a meaningful intervention in the West Papua conflict.

Recent developments in West Papua have presented a new opportunity for a reassessment of Australia's approach to the West Papua conflict by considering the following recommendations:

1. Acknowledge and engage the security issues of West Papua through the 2021 and 2022 Indonesia-Australia Ministerial Council on Law and Security
2. Support Pacific Island Forum motions to address human rights abuse in West Papua
3. Ensure that Australia maintains critical oversight of the training and strategies of counterterrorism unit Detachment 88 in response to West Papua independence groups

BACKGROUND

In 1962 the Netherlands signed the New York Agreement, transferring the administration of Western New Guinea to Indonesia and mandating the initiation of an independence referendum. [1] Consequently, the 1969 'Act of Free Choice' independence referendum resulted in a unanimous vote for Western New Guinea to remain a part of Indonesia. [2] The voting process was, however, exposed as fraudulent, as the Indonesian Government strategically selected the voting pool and surveyed the referendum through the threat of violence and bribery. [3]

In response to this, a range of Papuan independence movements and international activist groups have campaigned for the autonomy and self-determination of West Papua. These independence movements have endured and gained considerable momentum across decades, consistently leading to violent clashes between Indonesian military and West Papuan nationalists. [4]

Australia has historically enabled Indonesian control over West Papua. Indonesia maintains a stable military partnership with Australia, represented in the Indonesia–Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. [5] In 2014, Australia also signed the Framework for Security Cooperation with Indonesia, reaffirming the mutual cooperation and respect of national sovereignty. [6] Australia has consequently never effectively interfered with the West Papuan sovereignty-struggle.

In December 2014, leaders from prominent factions of the independence movement joined to form the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP). [7] The ULMWP represents a cohesive and strategic West Papuan-led campaign for the liberation of West Papua and West Papuan people.

The ULMWP contravened Indonesian rule in December 2020 and announced the formation of an independent provisional government of West Papua. [8] This body has been announced in direct opposition of Indonesian rule and proposes a self-governing West Papuan system that functions with political autonomy.

This provisional West Papuan government announced in May that they have established a cabinet and twelve government departments with corresponding ministers. [9] This was announced shortly after the Indonesian government had declared that the West Papua National Army-Free Papua Organization (TPNPB-OPM) is to be classified as a terrorist organisation, along with members and other associated organisations. [10]

THE PROBLEM

The West Papua conflict presents a multifaceted problem for Australian foreign policy. The principal issue is the severe human rights breaches within West Papua, sustained by the oppressive neo-colonial relationship between the Indonesian state and the indigenous Papuan people. Indonesia's military subjugation has perpetually restricted land and human rights in West Papua, which has consequently prevented self-determination. [11] Primarily, Australia's precarious yet strategically important geopolitical relationship with Indonesia has prevented any formal policy response.

Australia has failed to respond to the military suppression of West Papua and has not engaged in an official intervention or denunciation of the human rights abuse.

Australia's historical non-action exposes a significant issue in the bilateral relationship with Indonesia and an enduring liability in Australia's responsibility to the Pacific as a regional leader. The conflict is identified in the Pacific Islands Forum agenda as an immediate threat to the region and an area in which Australia has a clear duty to contribute. [12] Australia's historical non-action is indicative of an endeavour to uphold defence relations with Indonesia, but also a concession of the integrity of its Pacific Step-Up strategy. [13]

An immediate reorientation of Australia's relationship with Indonesia is unviable. However, an adjusted foreign policy which acknowledges the conflict without threatening a stable bilateral relationship with Indonesia is achievable.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

ACKNOWLEDGE SECURITY ISSUES IN WEST PAPUA AT THE INDONESIA- AUSTRALIA MINISTERIAL COUNCIL ON LAW AND SECURITY

Australia and Indonesia participate in the annual Ministerial Council on Law and Security. The Council was designed to provide a platform to discuss regional security priorities and enhance bilateral dialogue. [14] Since its inception, West Papua has never been identified in the Council's joint communiqué.

Australia should recognise the West Papua conflict by orientating the Council's 2021 and 2022 agenda towards cooperation in ensuring domestic stability and responding to insurgency in the Indo-Pacific region. The current military engagement in Indonesia is its greatest domestic concern and must be recognised in discussions of domestic conflict.

Through the Council, an official discussion regarding the military components of the West Papua conflict can be executed in a non-confrontational method. This would not involve discussion of human and land rights, but just an initial discussion of the impact of the conflict and the associated factors involved.

2 SUPPORT PACIFIC ISLAND FORUM MOTIONS TO ADDRESS HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) is the premier intergovernmental organisation of the Pacific region. It functions as a key multilateral platform for Pacific Island nations to advance state and economic alliance in the context of regional security. Australia is PIF a member state and greatly benefits from its access to the forum despite commonly having an agenda inconsistent with other Pacific Island members. The West Papua conflict is a central priority for the PIF, who have continuously campaigned for international action, including the recent reaffirmation of support in June 2021. [17]

As the PIF enters a new era under Secretary General Henry Puna, Australia has an opportunity to realign its position and support motions for international action in West Papua, including the push for access for the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner. [16] By supporting engagement in West Papua through Forum Standing Meetings, Australia can prove itself as purposeful member of the PIF and an active regional leader for the Pacific region.

3 GREATER OVERSIGHT OF DETACHMENT 88

In 2003, Australia and Indonesia jointly established Counterterrorism Special Detachment 88 (Detachment 88) as a specialist police squad formed to respond to terrorist threats. [15] Today, the Australia Federal Police (AFP) cooperatively run a law enforcement training facility for Detachment 88 in Jakarta. Previously, Detachment 88 methods have been criticised for the use of aggressive and excessive military strategies.

Given the Indonesian Government's new designation of TPNPB-OPM and other independence groups as terrorist organisations, it is likely that Detachment 88 have been activated. Australia must ensure that it maintains oversight and accountability of the legitimacy of Detachment 88 activities. As a partnering agency, the AFP must immediately respond to Indonesia in the case of inappropriate or disproportionate activity in the West Papua conflict.

CONCLUSION

Without active and purposeful support, the people of West Papua will continue to sustain monumental human and land rights abuse, and Australia will continue to lose face as a regional leader. The significance of Australia's strategic partnership with Indonesia is the ultimate factor that has prevented an effective response to the West Papua conflict. Consequently, prospective actions for Australia cannot be overly ambitious. However, by utilising the Indonesia-Australia Ministerial Council on Law and Security, engaging with the Pacific Island Forum, and maintaining accountability for Detachment 88, an adjusted foreign policy which acknowledges the conflict is achievable.

Henry Heritage

Henry is a policy officer in the Queensland Government and holds a Bachelor of International Studies from the University of Wollongong. He has a particular interest in Pacific politics and South Pacific regional security.

REFERENCES

- [1] Saltford, J. (2003) *The United Nations and the Indonesian Takeover of West Papua, 1962-1969: the Anatomy of Betrayal*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, p. xix.
- [2] Musgrave, T. (2015) An analysis of the 1969 Act of Free Choice in West Papua. In: C. Chinkin & F. Baetens eds., *Sovereignty, Statehood and State Responsibility: Essays in Honour of James Crawford*, 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge (pp. 209-210) University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781107360075.017
- [3] Ibid. 220.
- [4] Blades, J. (2020). West Papua: The Issue That Won't Go Away for Melanesia. [online] Lowy Institute, Available at: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/west-papua-issues-wont-go-away-melanesia#_edn8 [Accessed 20 May 2021].
- [5] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2018). *Plan of Action for the Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2020-2024)*. Canberra: The Government of Australia and the Government of the Republic of Indonesia.
- [6] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2015). *Joint Understanding on a code of conduct between the Republic of Indonesia and Australia in implementation of the agreement between the Republic of Indonesia and Australia on the Framework for Security Cooperation ("The Lombok Treaty")*. Bali: The Government of Australia and the Government of the Republic of Indonesia.
- [7] Federal Republic for West Papua, West Papua National Coalition of Liberation, West Papua National Parliament, (2014). *Saralana Declaration on West Papua Unity*. Port Vila.
- [8] Radmehr, N. (2020). West Papuan separatists declare provisional government tell Indonesia to leave the region. [online] ABC News. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-12-01/west-papuan-separatists-provisional-government-to-oust-indonesia/12936404> [Accessed 15 May 2021].
- [9] Sinchi Foundation. (2021). West Papuan Provisional Government Forms Cabinet and Departments in Blow to Indonesian Rule. [online] Sinchi Foundation. Available at: <https://sinchi-foundation.com/news/west-papuan-provisional-government-forms-cabinet-and-departments-in-blow-to-indonesian-rule/> [Accessed 16 May 2021].
- [10] CNN Indonesia. (2021). Government Officially Establishes KKB Papua Terrorists. [online] CNN Indonesia. Available at: <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20210429123128-12-636368/pemerintah-resmi-tetapkan-kkb-papua-teroris> [Accessed 15 May 2021].

REFERENCES

- [11] Sara, S., Worthington, A., Mambor, V. (2020) The battle for West Papuan independence from Indonesia has intensified with deadly results. [online] ABC News. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-12/west-papua-secret-war-with-indonesia-for-independence/12227966> [Accessed 15 May 2021].
- [12] Taylor, M. (2021) Pacific Islands Forum, High-Level Segment - 7th Meeting, 46th Regular Session Human Rights Council. [video]. Available at: <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1w/k1wxm10gj4> [Accessed 20 May 2021].
- [13] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2019). STEPPING UP AUSTRALIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH OUR PACIFIC FAMILY. Canberra: The Government of Australia.
- [14] Australian Embassy – Indonesia. (2015). Joint Statement The Meeting of the Indonesia-Australia Ministerial Council on Law and Security. Jakarta: The Australian Government.
- [15] Putra, B A. (2020). Human Rights Concerns in Indonesia's Counterterrorism Policies: The Emergence of a Domestic Security Dilemma in Indonesia's Densus 88 Security Posture. Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, [online] Volume 9(6). Available at: <https://www.richtmann.org/journal/index.php/ajis/issue/view/280> [Accessed 17 May 2021].
- [16] Pacific Islands Forum. (2021) Focus on the Forum family for Secretary General Henry Puna. [online] Pacific Islands Forum. Available at: <https://www.forumsec.org/2021/05/25/osg/> [Accessed 29 May 2021].
- [17] Blades, J. (2021) New head of fractured Pacific Forum stresses unity. [online] RNZ Pacific. Available at <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/445382/new-head-of-fractured-pacific-forum-stresses-unity> [Accessed 25 June 2021].



© **YOUNG AUSTRALIANS IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

POLICY@YOUNGAUSINT.ORG.AU