



BRITISH SUPPORT OF THE DUTCH REGIME IN WEST IRIAN AT THE ONSET OF THE COLD WAR: CIRCUMSTANCE OF 'EVIL NECESSITY'

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the British policy on West Irian during the early stage of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. It focuses on the reasons why British supported the Dutch resolution to retain its colonial power on this 'Komodo Island'. The main references are British official records from the British National Archive, Kew, London. Though they focus on British policy, the sources throw light on some of fundamental issues in Southeast Asia in general during that period. They prevail that although Western colonialization is a 'taboo' phrase, in some circumstances it was an 'evil necessity.' First, British support for Dutch colonialism in West Irian was to prevent a circumstance that could allow any external intrusion such as the communist and Russian from setting up their base on that island which could endanger this region. The need for the Dutch colonialism was crucial because the newly formed Indonesia was still inexperienced in administering and managing territories. Secondly, it was a measure to eliminate any intention of Indonesia to spread, or to conquer, its neighboring nations such as Australia New Guinea, Borneo and the Malay States. In other words, should they were to be allowed to take West Irian it would become a precedent for Indonesia to make subsequent claims on other British territories.

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the onset of the Cold War in the 1940s, the Dutch were still in power in Indonesia, and in the mainland, the French was still in power in Indo-China. In the north, the prospect of communist triumph in China redoubled the Western Allies attempt to make Southeast Asia a zone of free from

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its influence. The British were one of the superpowers during that period. Though partially, they also involved in Indonesian politics after the Second World War and played a huge role in West Irian affairs especially in the negotiation between Indonesia and Netherlands. While the Far East was the main area of US responsibility, Southeast Asia was the main area of the British.¹ In those circumstances, the British were more inclined to support Dutch occupation in West Irian.

As one of the superpowers, British official records are among important sources to explore some of the main issues during that period. Evidently, they throw some light on British and Dutch political and military policies at the time as well as that of the Indonesia. This paper explores the reasons why the British supported the Dutch policy to retain their position in West Irian within a year after the 27 December 1949 Round Table Treaty? It also touches some of the reasons why the Dutch insisted on staying on the island and how Indonesia perceived the claims proposed by the Dutch.

2. WEST IRIAN AT THE ONSET OF THE COLD WAR

As already discussed elsewhere, since the early twentieth century, Indonesian nationalists had sought an independent Indonesia covering all the territories occupied by the Dutch, including West Irian.² After a long struggle, Dutch rule ended with a Japanese invasion during World War II. The wheel of fortune turned in favor of Indonesian nationalists. At the end of Japanese occupation, on 17 August 1945 they proclaimed their independence which led to the establishment of a free and independent Republic of Indonesia, covering the whole territory of the former Netherlands East Indies. The proclamation configured a strong momentum that led to an armed struggle, which ended with independence for Indonesia on 27 December 1949 after the Round Table Treaty. Power transfer occurred and the Dutch agreed to free the whole of Indonesia from their rule.

According to the Round Table Treaty, those former Dutch territories would become a new sovereign state known as 'The United States of Indonesia' (USI). Later the name was changed to the Republic of Indonesia. However, on the very same date, the Dutch had established the Government of Netherlands of New Guinea in West Irian. In that Treaty, the Dutch recognized Indonesian sovereignty, covering all territories of the former Netherlands East Indies, but—as though the wheel of fortune turned against Indonesian nationalists—it was with the exception of West Irian. The West Irian position had been an issue which was to be discussed within a year.

The unresolved status of West Irian in the 1949 Round Table Conference revealed the Dutch reluctance to cede the territory to independent Indonesia. A British official document recorded the Dutch argument that they did not enter into the Round Table Conference in 1949 with any intention of handing over West New Guinea to Indonesia.³ They had fully reserved their position on this territory ever since 1945. They argued that Article 2 of the Charter of the Transfer of Sovereignty was self-evident that West New Guinea was not included in the territory to be transferred to Indonesian sovereignty.⁴

¹ Tarling (1998).

²See for instant, Justus and Van Der Kroef (1958). Justus

³FO 371/129517, Draft Cabinet Paper, 12.12.1957.

⁴ *Ibid.*

3. THE DUTCH REFUSALS

As recorded in British official documents, the Dutch refusals were due to some major points. Firstly, they claimed that geologically, botanically, zoologically, ethnologically and linguistically West New Guinea was not part of Indonesia but rather of Oceania. Only in small areas of the coastal fringe was Indonesian cultural influence found.

Secondly, the Dutch claimed that West Irian still needed to remain under their administration for the sake of the Papuan people. They argued that Indonesia would not be able to administer the territory as Indonesia did not have a right to West Irian based on the fact that the majority of the people in the territory were Papuans, not Indonesians.

Thirdly, as stated in a letter to the Secretary of State of United States of America on 16 September 1949, the Dutch Foreign Minister mentioned that it was only through Dutch rule in West Irian that the territory stood the best chance of being developed according to the principle in Chapter XI in the United Nations Charter.

Fourthly, the Dutch argued that it was difficult for them to cede West Irian to a new and inexperienced government like Indonesia. This issue was mentioned by the Dutch ambassador to the London Foreign Office on 18 October 1949.⁵

Of course, there was a military reason. New Guinea provided the Dutch with a useful base in Hollandia, and they may have hoped that, should complete chaos arise in Indonesia whether through domestic discords or another world-wide war, circumstances might arise in which, being established already in the neighborhood and having a background of vast experience of the Indies, the Dutch might with the approval of influential sections of world-opinion, be able to re-establish themselves in their former colonies.⁶

4. THE REBUTTALS BY INDONESIA

The Dutch's inclination to continue their military presence in the West Irian was not well-received by the Indonesia. In fact, Indonesia was not so supportive to the West Irian's problem during the Round Table Conference of 1949 negotiation because they were worried that it would damage the power transfer conference that was being held. In other words, the question of West Irian was not a major issue at the Round Table Conference.⁷

The claim proposed by the Dutch on the ethnological basis, however, was refuted by Indonesia. On the ethnological issue, the Indonesians pointed out that though (the people of) New Guinea may not be Indonesian, "equally it is not the Dutch either; and though New Guinea may be closer ethnographically to Papua than to Indonesia, it is certainly closer to Indonesia than to the Netherlands."⁸

⁵ DO 35/2862, Telegram from Commonwealth Relations Office, no. 374, 22 October 1949.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ DO 35/5985, United Nation General Assembly, A/2694, 18 Ogos 1954, 9th Session, Supplementary List of items for the agenda of the ninth regular session of the General Assembly: Item proposed by Indonesia. The Question of West Irian (West New Guinea). Letter dated 17 August 1954 from the Acting Permanent Representative of Indonesia to the United Nations, addressed to the Secretary General, p. 3.

⁸ DO 35/2863, Dutch New Guinea, Research Department, Foreign Office, INDO/8/49, 21 October 1949.

Indonesia had also rebutted that historically West Irian had connections to Maluku that was formerly under the rule of the Tidore Sultanate, which was a part of the Malay Archipelago kingdom before it fell under Dutch colonialization. Indonesia felt that the perpetuation of Dutch power in West Irian was tantamount to the colonization of their territory and one that posed a threat to its national border.⁹ Besides, Indonesia could not accept the Dutch consideration for occupying the West Irian as a way of looking after the concerns of Europeans who were still staying in the territory.

5. SUPPORTING THE DUTCH ARGUMENTS

The arguments put forth by the Dutch to justify their continued presence in West Irian were well supported by the British. For instance, a letter from the Foreign Department to the Secretary of the Committee of the Chief of Staff had mentioned about the British position on the future of the Dutch military, air base and sea defense in Indonesia.¹⁰ The British thought West Irian should remain under Dutch administration although they were cognizant of the fact that West Irian would be returned to Indonesia after 1949. The letter also mentioned:

As you are probably aware, the Round Table Conference (1949) decided that the Netherlands Government should surrender sovereignty over the naval bases of Surabaya to the Indonesian Government, but that the base should continue to be run by a Netherlands officer selected by the Indonesians, and the Royal Netherlands Navy should enjoy certain facilities there. It was also agreed that the status of Netherlands New Guinea (West Irian) should be decided by further discussion between the two parties during the course of 1950.¹¹

Britain also had the same opinion about the national principles of the Papuans which was widely divergent from that of the Indonesians. They asserted that the Dutch had a right to stay in West Irian should they have no intention of giving up as they had governed the people of the Papua for a long time. The British accepted this sentimental reason for the Dutch to continue staying in a territory that they had occupied for 300 hundred years.

The future of West Irian was also discussed in the Joint Planning Staff meeting at British Foreign Office. In their discussion, Sir George Creasy from British Navy suggested that the report would be more concrete with the inclusion of an addendum to its conclusion. The addendum suggested that “The United States of Indonesia cannot be counted a stable and friendly regime at present and we should therefore encourage the Dutch to remain in New Guinea.”¹² The suggestion was seconded by R.H. Scott. The statement above clearly illustrated British position that they had doubt about the future of Papua under independent Indonesia.

From the perspective of strategy, according to the British, based on the importance of West Irian to the defense of the Pacific, it should be ensured that the transfer of power was truly stable and that the government in question truly ready. Therefore, according to the British, West Irian should remain under Dutch administration until such a time deemed more suitable. On the stand of

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ CO 537/6284, Future of Dutch military, naval and air bases in the East Indies, COS (50) 79, 1 March 1950.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² CO 537/6284, Strategic importance of New Guinea JP (50) 20 (7), meeting at 20 July 1949.

the British, The Department of Foreign Relations stated that until November 1949, they were still discussing the details of the matter and expected that both sides would exchange views and this would influence any resolution.

6. BRITISH INTERESTS AND POLICY

Inevitably, there were practical reasons for the British to support the Dutch insistence to retain its colonial power in West Irian namely, military geo-strategic, economic, communication route, geographical strategic network, and Russia's threat on Australia. Generally speaking, British policy on West Irian in the post-Indonesian independence was concerned with their own Strategic importance. Nevertheless according to Tarling, the British policy on West Irian was not really important to them. He claimed that, "...For Britain, New Guinea (West Irian) itself had a low priority..." because the territory did not directly involve British interest.¹³

However, this area was important to Britain due to several aspects as follows:

a. There is no direct United Kingdom interest in this problem, but there is an indirect interest on both strategic and political grounds.

b. In the strategic field the importance of Eastern New Guinea for the defense of Australia makes it desirable that Western New Guinea should remain under the control of a stable and friendly government.

c. On political grounds, the transfer of Netherlands New Guinea to Indonesia might eventually be used as a precedent for subsequent claims to Australia New Guinea and to the British territories in Borneo.¹⁴

The indirect interest also concerned Australia, a close ally of the British in Asia, for the guarantee of its security. A large part of Australia's territory was situated in West Irian proximity. The island was already declared in 1946 as part and parcel of the South Pacific region by virtue of the territory's importance in the Second World War. This was due to the fact that in that period, Irian had been a battle theatre between the Allied Powers and the Axis Powers. The importance of Irian was apparent when it joined the United States and Australian military in the fight against the Japanese.

Strategically, to the British, the whole of the island of New Guinea was a very suitable base for their army. In one British document, it was mentioned that "... Although the large island of New Guinea is divided into the territories of Dutch New Guinea, North East New Guinea and Papua, but it is, for all practical purposes, now (during the Second World War) considered as a whole and embraced by the South West Pacific Command."¹⁵

In short, British and Australian interest in New Guinea was due to geo-strategic factors of the island, especially from the aspect of Australia's defense and security.¹⁶ Apart from the above mentioned, their naval and air bases in West Irian could control the northern region right up to

¹³ Tarling (2000).

¹⁴ DO 35/2863, Netherlands New Guinea (West Irian), 19 December 1950.

¹⁵ AIR 40/1739, List of airfields, landing grounds, and seaplane bases. New Guinea, amendment 1/2/1944 and 1/6/1944.

¹⁶ AIR 40/1739, General British interest, as indicated by the number of British subject, annex in the Letter from H.B. White at Percy Island, to Deputy Director of Navigation, Brisbane, 12 January 1936.

Australia. The British Chief of Staff revealed the strategic facility of the territory, especially from the aspect of a naval base facility.¹⁷ According to him, in Hollandia, the coastal area of the Strait would be able to accommodate a few carriers and destroyers.

There were also two wooden wharves that had the capacity of 30000 to 35000 tons and 12 cranes, while Manokwari, despite there being only one port, was a good place to land. In Sorong, there was also a port and in Doorn Island, there was a central jetty. The British also identified a port in Babo that could accommodate a 5000-ton ship. Babo also had navigable rivers for medium-sized ships. The straits area could accommodate bigger ships.¹⁸

There was a port in Fakfak with a depth of between 144 to 222 feet that would easily accommodate ships up to 1,500 tons. There was a sheltered harbor in Kaimana that had the depth of 15 to 45 feet. In Port Moresby there was a Strait that was three miles wide and had the depth of between 42 to 72 feet that could be turned into an army base. This harbor had excellent landing area, complete with winch machinery. It also had refueling facility. In Madang, there was another small, sheltered harbor.¹⁹

From the naval strategy point of view, on the one hand, New Guinea was a good stop in the sea route which connected harbors in Western Australia and Singapore, the Philippines and Japan. On the other hand, this network was also open to enemy submarine attacks. In the same development, there was limited well-defended and safely refueling facility for their ships in this area. The existence of these harbors and natural sea facilities in Australian-New Guinea and Manus were strategically important to Britain. Australia had developed that area as a northern base. Comparatively, the harbors in West Irian were, despite not having great importance as the harbors of Australian-New Guinea, still very much needed by the Allies (Western powers). Britain needed support from the marine air force in West Irian to reinforce not only their air power but also that of Australia's.²⁰

From the point of view of air communication, the northern Irian territory base was needed to connect to other areas including Australia and the Philippines. To the British, although the importance of West Irian was rather marginal, its general location was crucial in the protection of Indonesia or the Philippines in the event of enemy attacks. The highest concern was the possible threat to Australia's defense and security should West Irian ever be enemy occupied. For this reason, Britain advocated, at the very least, an increase in the preparation of internal surveillance in order to prevent any possible threat from ever happening.

On the whole, Britain concluded that although strategic facility in Dutch-New Guinea was not very important to the Allies, possible threats on both the Australian and Australian New Guinea harbors, justified that Dutch-New Guinea should be taken seriously. Nevertheless, the harbors in Australian-New Guinea and Papua were crucially needed for control of sea communication, enemy control of which would bring about huge implications on Australia.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Britain's interest in geographical strategic network in that territory was very obvious. Irian waters, especially Halmahera and Seram Sea in the northwest region and the south of the Bird's Head territory, that is, in the coastal area of Sorong Peninsula, the coastal areas of Aru Sea and Timika, together with the Strait in the east of Nusatenggara and Ombai Babar, were the main routes of nuclear submarines sailing between the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean.²¹

There was another issue that had an impact on British strategic consideration in Indonesia namely, Indonesia's inclination to forge an alliance with Russia. Britain believed that this scenario was a threat to the Western powers in Southeast Asia. It was also considered a threat to sea communication in the region. Due to Russia's influence in Indonesia that was seen as threatening Australia, Britain felt that:

It has been agreed that, owing to the need to concentrate resources on more vital treatments, allied strategy in this region should be defensive. The aim, therefore, should be to employ the minimum forces in the area; we should not therefore be able to undertake extensive military operations to obtain strategic requirements in Indonesia.²²

As discussed above, the question of Australian security was one of the factors that shaped British policy in Indonesia. A letter from the British High Commissioner in Canberra stated that Australia was crucial British naval defense in Southeast Asia and when this was connected to the importance of Australia, it therefore directly involved the importance of West Irian. This was due to the fact that the close relationship between Indonesia and Russia was seen as a threat to the position of Western allies in Southeast Asia and also British sea communication network in the region. Therefore, in the event of Russian occupation of Indonesia, it would create a serious threat to Australia. Britain thus felt that West Irian was vital in the communication control and defense strategy between Britain and Australia. This strategy was also a tool to prevent further development of Russian influence in the coastal areas of the Pacific.

There was also an economic reason. West Irian territory was among the best areas in Indonesia to provide extra space for the settlement of surplus population from the nearby islands. Apart from that, the British were of the opinion that the Dutch would most likely think of West Irian as a potential economic centre in the future. This was due to the potential difficulties in getting the economic opportunities in other Indonesian territories. By making West Irian their centre for economic activities, the Dutch would be able to continue their commercial activities across Indonesia through their middle men - the Chinese merchants.

At the same time, there was the potential of petroleum in that region. This development was seen as an opportunity to serve the petroleum needs of various petroleum companies, especially those owned by the Dutch that were operating in Sumatra, should their operations there be terminated.²³ At the same time, there were commercial interests on the raw materials found in the

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² CO 537/6284, Future of Dutch military, naval and air bases in the East Indies, Annex to JP (49) 114 (Final), 14 October 1949.

²³ This tendency is closely related to British less reliance on oil production from West Asia as a result of the crisis in the Suez Canal in 1959. Accordingly, British welcome any steps taken to reduce their dependence on Middle East oil
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area. Another interest included a control of human trafficking (slavery) of the local people by foreign traders. There was also the interest of sea trading route through the Strait of Torres. For the British, New Guinea was important to them specifically for the development of their commercial prospects in the territory following high demand by the British on pearls and copra between the 1930s and 1940s. These two commodities were the main exports of Solomon Island and British New Guinea during that period.

Britain was, however, willing to accept Indonesia's authority over West Irian should the matter be the outcome of successful talks between the two sides. The rejection and isolation of Indonesia was to be avoided by the international body and the Western countries. In June 1950, the Cold War tension had escalated to Korean War. Britain felt that it was absolutely crucial to avoid any action that would push Indonesia into an alliance with Russia.

7. CONCLUSION

Although it was not precisely stated in any document, the reason for British support of the Dutch regime in West Irian apparently could be perceived as 'evil necessity.' It was inevitable measure as there were practical agenda to serve British own interest in terms of military geo-strategic, economic, communication route and geographical strategic network, behind their support but it is evidently clear that British support for Dutch colonialism in West Irian was because they were more confident in the Dutch than Indonesia in protecting West Irian from the menace of any external intrusion such as the communists and Russia from setting up their base on the island which could endanger this region. The British had no confidence in the newly independent Indonesia because they (Indonesia) had no experience in administering and managing the state and its territories. In the eyes of the British, Indonesia could not be counted as a stable and friendly regime. In fact, if West Irian was not colonized by the Dutch, it would be taken by the Indonesia and this unstable and unfriendly regime (*viv.* Indonesia) would set up a precedent to claim to other territories belonging to the British. This paper concludes that the Dutch colonial regime was perceived as 'evil necessity' by the British because they had doubts about the future of West Irian should it be under independent Indonesia. In fact, Britain feared if West Irian was not colonized by the Dutch and were taken by the Indonesia, the West Pacific region would become politically, economically and socially unstable. Therefore, from June 1950, as the Cold War tension escalated to Korean War, this policy was influential in shaping British policy and became the driving factor in the development of British policy in Indonesia specifically in West Irian. Britain felt that it was absolutely crucial to avoid any action that would push Indonesia into an alliance with Russia and China.

ARCHIVE MATERIAL

AIR 40/1739, General British interest, as indicated by the number of British subject, annex in the letter from H.B. White at Percy Island, to Deputy Director of Navigation, Brisbane, 12 January 1936.

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