

The West New Guinea dispute and the policies of Australia, the United States, and Britain, 1946-1962

(with notes on sources)

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An Overview of the Dispute

The West New Guinea (WNG) dispute was a quarrel between the Dutch and Indonesian governments over the Western half of the island of New Guinea. Beginning in 1946 during negotiations on Indonesian independence, the Netherlands argued that WNG was different to the rest of the Indonesian archipelago, and should remain under Dutch control. The Indonesians contended that they should be handed all territory previously under Netherlands jurisdiction. Attempts to resolve the issue via bilateral discussion ended in failure. The Dutch decided to ignore Indonesian demands and, aided by their *de facto* control of WNG, established their own plans for its development. Meanwhile, the Indonesians sought international help in their quest to secure the 'liberation' of Irian. Between 1954 and 1958 they attempted to use the United Nations as a means of pressing the Dutch into negotiations that would guarantee the hand-over of WNG. This proved unsuccessful and from 1958, backed by a substantial flow of arms from the communist bloc, Indonesia threatened to invade WNG. The new strategy bore fruit in 1962. Fearful that a war would drive Indonesia into the arms of the communists, the United States and Britain pushed a militarily isolated Dutch government into effectively giving WNG to the Indonesians. Indeed, although it was agreed that in 1969 the Papuan inhabitants of WNG would be given the right to choose union with Indonesia or independence, it was widely recognised that Indonesian control of WNG in the intervening years – and during the vote – would ensure that the territory would remain permanently in Jakarta's grasp.

Sources: There are relatively few works on WNG, and even fewer that are dedicated to providing an introduction to the topic. R. C. Bone's work, *The Dynamics of the Western New Guinea (Irian Barat) Problem*, is one of the oldest and most frequently cited studies, but it is poorly written and overly partisan. A more balanced account – and a useful source of factual material – is William Henderson's *West New Guinea: The Dispute and its Settlement*. The best summaries of the dispute are contained within works that are geared to specific aspects of the problem. See below for some of these.

Australian Policy Towards the Dispute, 1949-1962

The policy of the Australian Labor Government toward WNG during negotiations over Indonesian independence was essentially one of non-involvement. Although, in 1949, a preference was expressed for keeping the territory out of Indonesian hands, the Australians said WNG was a problem that should be solved between the Dutch and the Indonesians.

The election of Robert Menzies' Liberal-Country Party Government in 1949 brought with it a more interventionist policy. It was decided that Australia should actively seek to prevent Indonesian acquisition of WNG, and that a Dutch administration should be supported. This remained the position for most of the period prior to December 1961. It was practically demonstrated by public and private diplomatic support for the Dutch – most notably at the United Nations and in Washington, London, and Jakarta – and by administrative cooperation between the Netherlands and Australian sides of New Guinea. These actions angered the Indonesians, and were a central factor in the growth of tension between Australia and Indonesia during the 1950s.

An exception to the period of anti-Indonesian and pro-Dutch Australian policy occurred in 1959 and part of 1960. Fearful that the WNG dispute was driving Indonesia into the arms of a supportive communist bloc, and that, at the least, an increasingly powerful neighbour would become belligerent, Australia tempered its attitude. The Indonesians were told that while Australia continued to prefer Netherlands sovereignty over WNG, and eventual self-determination for the Papuan inhabitants, it would not oppose any agreement freely reached between the Netherlands and Indonesia.

This concession was soon quietly retracted, apparently because Menzies came to believe that anti-Australian and anti-Western sentiment in Indonesia was largely unrelated to the WNG issue. But the accompanying return to a hard-line policy proved fruitless. In December 1961, President Sukarno of Indonesia told the Americans he would invade WNG if the US did not bring the Dutch to the negotiating table. Reluctantly, the Americans agreed – and in doing so they chose to force a reversal of Australian policy. This was accomplished, in cooperation with the British, by telling the Australian Government that a Dutch capitulation was inevitable and that no support would be given to a rearguard defence of WNG. Though not afraid that an invasion was imminent, the Australians recognised that they and the Dutch were fatally isolated. Consequently, in public statements on 30 December 1961 and 12 January 1962, it was made clear that Australia was standing back, and would not interfere in US-led Dutch-Indonesian negotiations.

Sources: The bulk of primary source material on Australian policy is located in the National Archives of Australia (NAA) in Canberra. The two most important series of files – one 'Top Secret' and the other 'Secret' – are those created by the Australian Department of External Affairs (DEA). The Top Secret series is perhaps more significant, but by no means contains all notable material. Moreover, it is difficult to interpret the Top Secret documents correctly without having read related documents in the Secret files. The reference details necessary for viewing these files at the Archives can be looked up online using the NAA's search engine (www.naa.gov.au). It is best to use a key word search because the titles of the files are more consistent than the reference numbers. All contain the words 'Developments Relating to Future Status', which is generally prefixed by 'West New Guinea' (and occasionally by 'Dutch New Guinea' or 'Netherlands New Guinea'). For the period between October 1949 and January 1962, there are 59 files in the Secret series and 14 in the Top Secret series. For those interested in Australian policy in the lead-up to the plebiscite of 1969, it is worth noting that these series continue through the 1960s (more essential reading for 1962-1969 is John Saltford's PhD thesis, *UNTEA and UNRWI: United Nations involvement in West New Guinea during the 1960s*, University of Hull, 2000).

Files not included in these series, but nonetheless of considerable significance, are: those made by the Department of Defence and containing Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), Joint Planning Committee (JPC), and Defence Committee (DC) reports on WNG (A1838/269, TS696/3/2, Pt 1; A5954/1, 1682/13; A1838/269, TS696/3/2, Pt 2; A1838/269, TS696/3/3, Pt 1; A1838/269, TS696/2/2, Pt 4; A1838/269, TS696/3/8; A1838/269, TS666/42; A7941/2, I8, Pt 1; A1838/269, TS666/40), letters to Menzies from his Minister for External Affairs, Richard Casey (M2576,1, 39), and various files relevant to the 1959 visit of Indonesian Foreign Minister, Dr Subandrio (A1838/276, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1; A4940/1, C2314). Prime Ministers' Department (PMD) files on WNG consist mainly of duplicates of DEA cables contained in the DEA files, but they should be skimmed for occasional minutes and memoranda written by Menzies' key advisers (see the A1209/23 series; search also the NAA database using 'Dutch New Guinea', 'West New Guinea', and 'Netherlands New Guinea'). Cabinet minutes (otherwise named 'Decisions' or 'Conclusions') vary in series number, owing to changes in the system maintained by the Cabinet Secretariat, and are best found via hard copy reference files in the NAA reading room. All files of minutes between 1950 and 1962 should be skimmed. All Cabinet submissions on WNG are referred to by number in the minutes.

Notable Australian primary sources outside the NAA include photocopies of Casey's diaries at the National Library of Australia (MS6150, Series 4). These contain much material on WNG not mentioned in Casey's published diaries. However, their value is tempered by the fact that they were not completely secret at the time; excerpts were distributed in large numbers to a wide variety of people. Menzies' papers at the National Library (MS4936), which include letters from Sir Percy Spender (Australian Minister for External Affairs, 1950-51) and others, are not particularly illuminating on WNG. Neither are those of Spender (MS4875). The diaries of Sir Walter Crocker (Australian Ambassador to Indonesia, 1955-56), also kept by the National Library, are a rich source, particularly on the social dynamics in Cabinet and the DEA in the mid-1950s, but they may only be accessed with permission.

Of the secondary sources focussed on Australia's role during the dispute, the most comprehensive are the doctoral theses of: J. Verrier (*Australia, Papua New Guinea, and the West New Guinea Question 1949-1969*, Monash University, 1976); N. Viviani (*Australian Attitudes and Policies Towards Indonesia, 1950-1965*, Australian National University, 1973); M. Haupt (*Australian Policy Towards the West New Guinea Dispute, 1945-1962*, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 1970); P. Phelps (*Australia, International Diplomacy, and the West New Guinea Dispute*, University of Sydney, 1996); and S. Doran (*Western Friends and Eastern Neighbours: West New Guinea and Australian Self-Perception in Relation to the United States, Britain, and Southeast Asia, 1950-1962*, Australian National University, 1999). The dissertations of Verrier, Viviani, and Haupt are not based on archival records. Verrier does not pursue the WNG question in as much detail as the others, but provides a helpful analysis of the link between pre-War Australian opinion on NG the post-War position on WNG. Viviani's speculations are often reasonably accurate, and the thesis is worth looking at for interviews with now deceased figures (such as Spender). Haupt's dissertation is the least valuable, being highly descriptive. The works by Phelps and Doran make use of primary records. Phelps covers the entire period from 1949 to 1962, and attempts to place Australian policy within its wider international context. Doran focuses on three periods between 1950 and

1962 that are claimed to be typical of Australian policy. Of the journal articles using archival papers, there are currently only two, both by Richard Chauvel ('The emergence of the West New Guinea dispute', in Lowe, D. (ed.), *Australia and the End of Empires: The Impact of Decolonisation in Australia's Near North*, Allen & Unwin with the Australian Defence Centre, Geelong, 1996, pp. 53-68, and 'Up the Creek Without a Paddle: Australia, West New Guinea and the 'Great and Powerful Friends'', in Cain, F. (ed.), *Menzies in War and Peace*, Allen & Unwin with the Australian Defence Centre, Sydney, 1997, pp.55-71).

United States Policy, 1950-1962

For most of the 1950s, the United States pursued a policy of strict neutrality on WNG. This was because good relations with the countries on both sides in the dispute was a goal of US foreign policy. Australia and the Netherlands were useful allies in Europe and Southeast Asia respectively, while it was hoped that a cordial relationship with Indonesia might help to push that country in a pro-Western direction.

The factor that introduced instability into US policy was an increasing emphasis in Washington on Indonesia's importance to the West, combined an increasing fear that Indonesia was drifting toward communism. During America's covert support for the rebel movement in Indonesia's civil war of 1957-58 – the aim of which was to decisively remove Indonesia from communist influence – Secretary of State John Foster Dulles flirted with the notion of openly backing a Dutch WNG. Yet when the rebels failed, and the Americans were obliged to rebuild relations with Jakarta, policy on WNG became more strictly neutral than before. Then, as the possibility of a communist government in Indonesia continued to grow, American officials began to seriously consider entering the dispute with a view to mediating a solution. In 1961, this idea was officially adopted by John F. Kennedy's administration. From there, it was perhaps predictable that Sukarno's sabre-rattling would produce a decision in Indonesia's favour.

Sources: Primary material of relevance to the formulation of American policy is contained in the US National Archives (II), College Park, Maryland, and in the Presidential libraries of Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy. In the Archives, General Records of the State Department (RG 59) are probably the most useful, but these are difficult to locate because they are spread across a number of record series that are not centred on the WNG issue. See State Department Decimal Files (for all periods between 1950 and 1962), under 756C.00; 756C.5; 656.98; 656.61; 656.56D11. State Department Lot Files also hold documents on WNG. See those of: the Policy Planning Staff, 1957-61, Lot 67D548, box 141; the Office of Western European Affairs, 1941-1954, Lot 56D37, Box 1; the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Lot 58D614, box 2, Lot 58D3, box 3, and Lot 59D19, box 1. Record groups apart from those created by the State Department (such as RG 330 – Records of the Office of the Secretary of Defense) could reward study. Clues to the location of both State Department and Presidential papers on WNG are provided by the reference numbers on WNG documents published in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS). In fact, it is critical that students of American WNG policy begin with a thorough reading of FRUS because an impressive proportion of the most important documents (particularly those related to the period 1957-1962) may be found therein.

There are few secondary works on American WNG policy. Gregory Pemberton's chapter in *All the Way: Australia's Road to Vietnam* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987) is good on the Kennedy period, but he was unable to access all relevant documentation. Terrence Markin's thesis (*The West Irian Dispute: How the Kennedy Administration Resolved that "Other" Southeast Asian Conflict*, PhD dissertation, The John Hopkins University, 1996), is disappointing in terms of documentation – especially considering the ready access he had to US archives – though it does contain a number of interviews with participants that should be browsed. Ronald B. Frankum's 'Walking a Tightrope': An Examination of United-States Foreign Relations in West New Guinea, 1954-1962' (*Melbourne Historical Journal*, Vol. 26, 1998, pp. 65-81) looks at US and Australian policy. He uses documents from archives in each country, but some of his conclusions, particularly in relation to the early 1960s, should be treated with caution.

British Policy, 1950-1962

Initially, guided by Labour Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevan, the British declared that the dispute should be solved through bilateral negotiations between the Dutch and the Indonesians. In early 1951, it was decided that the dispute should be left in 'cold storage' until tempers cooled and talks could be restarted.

A change occurred with the advent of a Conservative Government in 1951. 'Cold storage' was still favoured, but it was viewed as a means of keeping WNG in Dutch hands. It was hoped that this stand would encourage good relations with the Netherlands and strengthen 'family' ties with Australia. Keeping the dispute in abeyance soon proved impossible, and this necessitated tactical changes in WNG policy, yet United Kingdom aims remained basically the same for a decade. To be sure, although the British were reticent to give vociferous assistance to the Dutch and Australian cause in the face of Indonesia's 'internationalization' of the dispute, they consistently gave low-key support to anti-Indonesian moves.

Like US policy, the long-term stability of Tory policy ended in 1961. In October, they decided to look for means of bringing about a compromise between the Dutch and Indonesians. They had become anxious about the impact that an unstable and communist-influenced Indonesia – or a war – might have on British assets and interests in the Far East. Nevertheless, they were at first still eager to smooth relations with the Dutch and Australians by avoiding plans that would resemble a surrender to Indonesia.

In December, the attempt to sit on the fence was abandoned. Officials in London took Sukarno's threats seriously, and chose to join the Americans in suing for a Dutch and Australian capitulation. In effect, they had decided that their interests in Southeast Asia were more important than the temporary consequences of a fallout with the Netherlands and Australia.

Sources: Pertinent British primary records on WNG may be found at the PRO. Organization at the PRO is far superior to that at Archives II, and documents on WNG are easy to access. The general correspondence files of the Foreign Office (FO 371) are perhaps the most important *vis-à-vis* WNG, and they can be found with a simple word-search. Dominions Office files are also useful (DO 35 and DO 165). Most relevant Cabinet papers (see CAB 128) are available in hard copy in the reading room. There are

other files on WNG, which I was unable to track in a four week period, that would be worth viewing. Phelps' thesis indicates that the following series contain documents on WNG: DO 35, DO 121, DO 169, DEFE 5, PREM 8, PREM 11, CAB 21, and CAB 133. Descriptions of these series, and the search engine for particular files, can be found online at: www.pro.gov.uk

Studies dealing with British policy provide no exception in terms of the dearth of document-based material on the WNG dispute. Nicholas Tarling is the sole contributor with his account of the Labour Government policy of 1950 ('Cold Storage': British policy and the Beginnings of the Irian Barat/West New Guinea Dispute', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2000, pp. 175-193).

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Editors note: This annotated bibliography was produced before the mid-2002 release of a new book by Chris Penders about West New Guinea, 1945-62.

- Penders, Chris *The West New Guinea Debacle: Dutch Decolonisation and Indonesia 1945-1962*, Adelaide, Crawford House, 2002.