Summary

This study examines how the New Guinea question arose, and looks at the reasons why the Netherlands finally transferred sovereignty over this part of its colonial empire. Attention is also given to the correspondence between government’s policy and the constant features of Netherlands foreign policy, and the extent to which military force played a part.

The Netherlands used three consecutive arguments to justify the retention of sovereignty over Western New Guinea, namely:
- settlement possibilities for Indo-Europeans
- the restriction of communist expansion
- self-determination for the Papuan people.

The value of these arguments is scrutinised. Since the United Nations also played a rôle in this conflict, particularly in the final stages, the place of this rôle in the ‘preventive diplomacy’ formulated by Hammarskjöld is considered.

I. Historical background

In 1602 the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (United East Indies Company) was set up primarily to engage in the spice trade in the Moluccas. These islands are situated close to New Guinea, and the populations of the two island groups had long had contacts with each other.

As early as 1606 a VOC ship explored the coast of New Guinea. No profitable trade seemed possible, however, and the large, empty island was left in peace for a long time. The sultan of Tidore claimed dominion over the northwestern coastal area. The Netherlands authorities recognized him as the local native ruler, although in fact his authority over the Papuans was slight.

The British controlled the East Indian archipelago during the Napoleonic era. After 1814 Dutch authority was reestablished and the Netherlands East Indies was governed as a single unit. New Guinea to the west of the longitude 141° E was officially declared Netherlands territory. However, until the Second World War very little happened. The territory was kept isolated, so that the primitive population was unable to develop. Foreigners interested in opening up the territory (Germans and Japanese) were refused access.

In 1944 the American forces liberated the island from Japanese occupation. Civil authority was transferred to Netherlands officials. Van Eechoud was appointed acting Resident, and occupied this post until 1950. As the authorities had more than enough on their plate elsewhere in the archipelago he was able to follow a policy of his own choosing, aimed at creating an independent position for New Guinea within the planned Netherlands-Indonesian Union which would allow the Papuans to develop independently.

From the end of the Middle Ages until 1949 New Guinea maintained ties (albeit fairly loose ones) with the Moluccas and with the Netherlands East Indies, but not with the eastern half of the island. Considerations of historical continuity, therefore, lead to the conclusion that it belonged to Indonesia.

II. The origin of the New Guinea problem

Over the years a group of persons of mixed blood, known as Indo-Europeans, emerged in the Netherlands East Indies. They regarded themselves as different from the native population, but had also few ties with the Netherlands. During the nineteen-twenties an idealistic movement formed within this group aimed at developing the ‘empty’ island of New Guinea by means of agricultural colonies. There, they thought, they could live under the tropical sun in their own way, free from the pressure of the native millions. Various attempts at agriculture were undertaken, but all were unsuccessful.

In the years after the war, when many Indo-Europeans believed that there would be no place for them in an independent Indonesia, the settlement movement gained new impetus. In October 1946 the Netherlands East Indies government called a minorities conference that backed the idea of settlements in New Guinea. This minorities conference had been preceded
by a conference in Malino in July 1946, where representatives adopted the policy of the Netherlands government that the new Indonesia should have a federal structure: the United States of Indonesia. At this conference a representative of New Guinea was present. He did not ask for separate status.

In December 1946 a third conference was convened in Denpasar, at which the state of East Indonesia was constituted. At the same time the Netherlands government stated that the position of New Guinea and its relation to East Indonesia would be further defined. Virtually all the conference participants opposed this. The government’s attitude was inspired by the action of the Indo-Europeans and of van Eechoud and his supporters. No representative of the Papuans attended this conference.

III. Indonesian independence

Preparations were made to set up a Netherlands-Indonesian Union during a series of talks, interrupted by two military operations in which Dutch forces reoccupied most of Java and Sumatra. The Netherlands’ aim was to create a solid Union which would embrace the United States of Indonesia and the Kingdom of the Netherlands. This concept found few friends in the world, and was particularly disliked by the United States. Following the second military operation, which was intended to force the Republicans to cooperate, the United Nations was asked to intervene. The consequence of all this was that Indonesia became independent at the end of 1949.

A conservative group in the Netherlands Parliament wanted to hand over sovereignty only if New Guinea was not included in the handover. This was also the government’s position. The feeling was that Indonesia had no moral right to that territory, but no clear reasons for this view were adduced. Possible Indo-European settlement was mentioned, but this was a red herring since the enthusiasm for colonisation was very slight. The only arguments that could be put forward in favour of the separate status were subjective ones – something of the old glory had to be retained.

Certain officers and diplomats believed that the Netherlands would still have influence in Eastern Asia and the Pacific if it retained a territorial stake there. The argument that New Guinea could well prove to be the last pillar of the Kingdom, as it was put, if the Netherlands should ever again be occupied, was sometimes heard.

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For the first time the right to self-determination was raised in the Netherlands Parliament. Nobody asked the Papuans for their opinion.

During the negotiations on independence provisions had been made for sub-territories which wished to have separate status. The government now declared these provisions applicable to New Guinea. This reasoning was faulty, since the relevant provisions provided for the population making its wishes known. In the case of New Guinea it was the government in The Hague which took the decision.

These were the circumstances in which the necessary two-thirds majority was obtained in the Netherlands Parliament. Indonesia also expressed agreement, since the expectation had been created that New Guinea would nonetheless be transferred to Indonesia after a short time. This did not happen. The consequence was a conflict which gradually took on a more bitter character.

IV International aspects

This conflict added another problem to those confronting the world in the period of the Cold War. Indonesia took the view that the Netherlands had illegally retained part of the unitary state in colonial thrall, and raised the matter at the United Nations. For Indonesia the question was one of sovereignty. It was prepared to accord a far-reaching role to the Netherlands in the development of the territory. The Netherlands maintained that it was legally entitled to exercise sovereignty. The Indonesian view obtained a majority, but not the required two-thirds.

The Netherlands canvassed, and won, Australia’s support with the argument that Indonesia was likely to go communist, and that in that case New Guinea would be a Western bulwark in the ‘cordon sanitaire’ of islands to the north of Australia.

To begin with the Netherlands defensive effort was geared merely to withstanding small-scale infiltration.

In 1955 the Indonesian president, Sukarno, hosted a conference of 29 African and Asian states at Bandung. This conference gave an important impulse to the movement of unaligned countries, and ensured prestige for Sukarno as one of the important leaders of the third world.
The situation in Indonesia was unstable. Moderate pro-Western groups faced fiercely nationalist or communist factions. Sukarno favoured the nationalists, but came to lean more and more heavily on the communists as their influence and support expanded. The strong man of the moderate group was the Army chief-of-staff, General Nasution.

The United States backed the moderate leaders with a view to preventing Indonesia from lining up too closely with the communist bloc. This was in accordance with the policy of decolonisation, which aimed at the creation of free, nationalist and economically viable states.

V Indonesia severs relations with the Netherlands

In 1956 Indonesia unilaterally abrogated the Union with the Netherlands. Relations between the two countries had become difficult for a number of reasons, particularly the political trials of Dutch citizens. 1957 was marked by increasing agitation against Dutch business interests, culminating in 'takeovers' by the communist trade unions. The army intervened to stop this, and the government regained control, but the net result was nonetheless that Dutch businesses were confiscated. This was Indonesia's way of severing the economic relations which it still branded as colonial. The Indonesian government stated, however, that it was prepared to allow access to Dutch industry and trade on a footing of equality as soon as the New Guinea question was satisfactorily settled. The Netherlands refused to accept this.

Following the confiscation of Dutch business interests the Netherlands government asked the United States for assistance in the event of Indonesian aggression against New Guinea. In a series of discussions Dulles and Luns agreed that there was a real risk of Indonesia turning to the communist camp. Dulles spoke of the 'thin line of defense' which ran from Japan via Taiwan, the Philippines and New Guinea to Australia. He considered that New Guinea should remain in Dutch hands, but he continued working to ensure that Indonesia was not alienated from the West. America would not commit itself to giving military assistance in the event of Indonesian aggression, but was prepared to declare itself opposed to the use of force in the region. The Indonesians were informed of this in no uncertain terms.

This approach fitted in well with the policy of the Netherlands government, which was to achieve a political deterrent which would give the

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United States, Australia and the United Kingdom a shared responsibility for restraining Indonesia from aggression. To begin with this approach worked satisfactorily. The countries concerned let Indonesia know clearly that it did not have a free hand in the region.

Within the Netherlands government the realization gained ground that the island must be developed rapidly. The population was estimated at 700,000, a third of whom were not yet under any form of administration. Only 16,000 natives worked to western work patterns.

The Indonesian government drew the conclusion that it must pursue a strategy which avoided the large-scale use of force. It conceived a four-stage plan. Following a guerilla campaign in two stages a revolt would be instigated. The struggle would be completed in the fourth stage, with or without the use of military force. This plan was to take three to four years.

In reply, and as a counterweight to the rapidly growing Indonesian military strength, the Netherlands in 1960 decided to reinforce its defence capability, partly by withdrawing forces earmarked for NATO. Indonesia used this reinforcement as a pretext to break off all relations with the Netherlands.

VI. Change of attitude

The Netherlands realized that it would have to involve other countries if it was not to be regarded simply as a colonial power. The possibility of UN trusteeship was considered. Indonesia, however, had let it be known that it would reject this solution, and the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Hammarskjöld, therefore did not follow up this possibility.

At the beginning of 1961 the Indonesians signed an agreement with the Soviet Union for the delivery of heavy weapons which America had refused them. Nasution declared that Indonesia needed the arms to exert political pressure, but Sukarno let it be understood that military action was not excluded. Particular attention was given to further reinforcing the air force, which was politically left-leaning.

At this time an important change took place in the United States with the inauguration of President Kennedy, who set about dealing with trouble spots which threatened world peace. The purchase of Soviet arms by Indonesia created one such potential conflict.
In the Netherlands the domestic situation was affected by the resignation of Romme, the leader of the KVP (the Catholic People’s Party), the largest party in the successive coalition governments. Romme had been a convinced advocate of Netherlands sovereignty. More flexible viewpoints now surfaced in the KVP itself and in the other coalition parties, and the Socialists, who were in opposition, pressed for a way out of the impasse.

The Netherlands ambassador in Washington, van Roijen, persuaded the government to produce an initiative of its own, as otherwise Kennedy would take the matter into his own hands.

Following intensive consultation with the US State Department the Luns Plan was submitted to the UN General Assembly in October 1961: this stated that the Netherlands was willing to surrender sovereignty and to put the administration of New Guinea on an international footing. The central feature of the proposal was that there must be guarantees for a genuine right of self-determination for the Papuan population. This argument had hitherto played a minor role, being intended primarily for domestic consumption. Kennedy's actions had made it clear that the 'containment' argument, to which Eisenhower and Dulles had been receptive, would no longer serve.

A group of African countries submitted a resolution to the General Assembly calling for negotiations between the two countries concerned, without preconditions. If this were to be unsuccessful, a UN administration should be set up. The Netherlands supported this resolution and the Luns Plan was dropped. The resolution obtained a substantial majority, but not the required two-thirds. The USA voted in favour. The Netherlands had demonstrated that it was not trying to pursue a colonial policy, but the government was left in an awkward position as it had not discussed what to do if the Luns Plan proved impracticable.

Oddly, public opinion at home drew the conclusion from the Luns Plan affair that the position of the Netherlands had been weakened, and there was pressure from various quarters for direct talks with Indonesia.

VII. The end of the conflict

In these circumstances the initiative passed to the two presidents, Sukarno and Kennedy. The Indonesian press announced stridently that President Sukarno would give his 'final order' regarding New Guinea on 19 December 1961. It was generally anticipated that this would be the sign to launch an attack. This led Kennedy to write a letter to Sukarno, in which he expressed deep concern over Sukarno's view of the situation. He urged him not to resort to violence – America would not stand idly by in the face of aggression. Kennedy also offered to help look for a solution. The consequence was that the 'final order' was more moderate than expected – it was merely an order to mobilize.

The United States also informed the Netherlands of its willingness to act as mediator. U Thant, the UN Secretary-General, likewise called on both sides to settle their dispute and to renounce force.

Van Roijen informed the Netherlands government that he believed that President Kennedy would actively try to find a solution to the problem. The Netherlands could not, however, expect to be treated more favourably than Indonesia.

This led the government to modify its policy. The absolute insistence on self-determination was dropped, and the government informed the US administration of its readiness to engage in talks without preconditions.

In February 1962, the US Attorney-General, Robert Kennedy, visited both the Netherlands and Indonesia. He found a belligerent attitude in Jakarta, and a determination in The Hague to fight to retain the territory and people of New Guinea. This attitude was partly due to a conviction that it would be wrong to yield to threats of violence. The rule of law must be preserved.

Now that there was a real likelihood of armed conflict President Kennedy intensified his efforts to achieve an agreement. Both the Netherlands and Indonesia had agreed to talks in the presence of a third party under UN auspices. Kennedy obtained agreement that this should be the American diplomat, Ellsworth Bunker.

The first round of talks rapidly collapsed, and Bunker then put forward proposals of his own with the blessing of the State Department. Meanwhile it had become clear to Luns in discussions with Rusk and Kennedy that the Netherlands need not expect military support if the Indonesians should attack.

Indonesia raised the tension by infiltrating troops by sea, and by dropping hundreds of paratroops. Via an intercepted telegram the Netherlands
government learned that Indonesia had no real intention of pursuing negotiations and planned to liberate New Guinea by force as the final act of the revolution. To prevent this the Netherlands increased its defence capability further.

By the end of July Indonesia had put together an invasion force of 30,000 men. Vigorous diplomatic pressure from Kennedy, with support from U Thant, induced Indonesia to return to the negotiating table, and restrained Sukarno from launching an attack. The invasion fleet, which had set sail, was recalled. Kennedy’s personal intervention, in fact, prevented an armed conflict which could have embroiled the great powers, with the inevitable risk of escalation.

The United Nations acted in accordance with the principles of preventive diplomacy, as formulated by Hammarskjöld, although its rôle was secondary once Kennedy took the matter in hand. The agreement reached was that the Netherlands would hand over administration of the territory to a UN administrator, assisted by UN officials and 1500 Pakistani troops to ensure law and order. In mid-1963 the administration was transferred to Indonesia, and in 1969 the ‘act of self-determination’ was put into effect.

VIII. Conclusions

In conclusion it may be stated that the argument of Indo-European settlement was a mere pretext: the considerations which led many politicians to argue for retention of New Guinea were subjective. They wished to retain something of the former colonial glory. To the extent they were even aware of it, however, they could not use this argument at home, and even less in the international sphere. Agricultural settlements were tangible, or so it seemed, and this argument was therefore used. However, no colonisation was achieved, and after 1950 the argument was abandoned.

The case for holding back communism was based on logical grounds, and was supported by Australia and to some extent by the US, certainly under Eisenhower. However, this argument, too, was unsuitable for use in international politics. The Netherlands thus adopted a legalistic stance. This was reinforced by a moral argument, namely that the Netherlands selflessly wished to develop the people and its territory, and guide it to self-determination. This was quite unconvincing, firstly because the Netherlands had been unwilling to grant this same right to the Indonesians.

ten years previously, and secondly because the Netherlands government rejected any participation by the Indonesians in the process of educating the population.

In many respects Netherlands policy vis-à-vis New Guinea repeated many of the errors which had been evident in the period of the Indonesian liberation struggle (1945-1949). The strength of Indonesian nationalism was not recognized, absolute value was accorded to legalistic and moral arguments, the realities of international power politics were ignored, and the military potential of Indonesia was underestimated.

The American government, backed in the final stages by Australia, attempted to support the pro-Western leaders in Indonesia. They had done the same thing during the Indonesian liberation struggle, contrary to Dutch interests. Kennedy saw the danger of a confrontation with the communist bloc and forced the Netherlands to reach an agreement. At that moment the great majority of the Dutch people and their politicians were prepared to accept this. There was no desire to fight for something which was not regarded as a vital interest.

Kennedy’s actions therefore did not lead to a deterioration in relations between the United States and the Netherlands. Relations with Indonesia were also rapidly restored. The final conclusion must be that, as in the Indonesian liberation struggle, Netherlands policy was wholly unproductive.
XIII

De constatering van De Jong dat Nederland in de Tweede Wereldoorlog maar weinig invloed had op het Koninkrijk vitale beslissingen, omdat het maar weinig strijdkrachten ter beschikking kon stellen, is juist. Ook in de kwestie Nieuw-Guinea was er een correlatie tussen onze militaire waarde als bondgenoot en de mate waarin met de Nederlandse belangen en opvattingen werd rekening gehouden. Bij de samenstelling van onze krijgsmaat moet daarom worden gezorgd dat strijdkrachten in internationaal verband beschikbaar zijn, daar waar Nederlandse belangen in het geding zijn. Daarbij valt vooral te denken aan de beveiliging van de scheepvaart, met name de olierroutes.


XIV

De synode der Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk stelde terecht in haar Op- roep tot bezinning op het vraagstuk Nieuw-Guinea: 'Het is niet de taak van de Kerk een oplossing voor deze politieke kwestie aan te wijzen'. De synode handhaafde hiermee op juiste wijze de scheiding tussen kerk en staat. Het valt te betreuren dat daarvan is afgeweken bij de pastorale brief inzake de kernwapens van november 1980.

XV

Het neologisme 'balen' is aan het eind van de jaren vijftig in Nieuw-Guinea in het taalgebruik van de marine ontstaan uit de uitdrukking 'er tabak van hebben' via de tussenvormen 'er balen tabak van hebben', 'er balen van hebben', 'ervan balen'.

Dr. F.A. Stoett, Nederlandse spreekwoorden en gezegden, blz. 32.

XVI

Nederland is niet 'maar een klein landje'.
hetgeen de Nederlandse belangen in handel, scheep- en luchtvaart zou schaden, heeft de Nederlandse regering daarmee in haar beleid geen rekening gehouden.

V

Hoewel vertegenwoordigers van het bedrijfsleven met belangen in Indonesië de regering in verschillende stadia van het geschil om Nieuw-Guinea hebben gewezen op de repercussies daarvan in het economische vlak, bleek de invloed van de ondernemers, met inbegrip van de multinationals Koninklijke/Shell, Unilever en Philips, op het regeringsbeleid nihil.

Ch. van Esterik, Nederlands laatste bastion in de Oost, hft. III. De nederlaag van het koloniale kapitaal.

VI

Bij de pogingen om steun te verwerven van de Verenigde Staten en Australië bij een gewapend conflict heeft de Nederlandse regering er zich onvoldoende rekenschap van gegeven dat in dat geval Indonesië zich ook zou verzekeren van de hulp van andere landen. Een oorlog van meer dan regionale omvang zou dan niet onwaarschijnlijk zijn geweest. In ieder geval zou het een grote groep landen sterk hebben vervreemd van de westere wereld. Dit zou buiten verhouding zijn geweest tot de te verdwijnen belangen.

VII

Terecht stelt Teeuw dat 'het argument van de historische continuïteit het enige relevante is' voor de vaststelling van de grenzen bij het onafhanke-
lijk worden van een kolonie. Dit houdt in dat Nieuw-Guinea ten westen van 141 graden oosterlengte een integrerend deel van Indonesië vormt.

A. Teeuw, Het conflict met Indonesië als spiegel voor Nederland, blz. 12.

VIII

Artikel 1 van het Handvest van de Verenigde Naties vermeldt het beginsel van gelijke rechten en zelfbeschikking van volken. Het is nodig nader te definiëren wat moet worden verstaan onder 'volk' en 'zelfbeschikking' om dit beginsel te kunnen hanteren in de internationale politiek.

IX

Het verbreken van alle betrekkingen tussen Nederland en Indonesië leidde tot versmalling van de basis van de Nederlandse economie. De gevolgen daarvan traden aan het licht tijdens de diepe recessie van de economie in de jaren na 1980.

X

Oorlogvoorkoming en crisisbeheersing hangen niet alleen af van de af-
schrikkende werking van parate militaire middelen, maar evenzeer van de perceptie die een potentiële agressor heeft van de politieke wil en vastberadenheid om die militaire macht daadwerkelijk tegen agressie te gebruiken.

XI

Als grootscheeps geweld geen te hanteren middel is – wat steeds het geval is als er ook maar de geringste kans is op gebruik van kernwapens – zijn subversieve acties en plaatselijke coups-de-main de waarschijnlijkste con-
flictvormen.

XII

De in Nederland wijd verbrede opvatting dat ons land in de internationa-
le politiek een voortrekkersfunctie moet vervullen ('gidsland' moet zijn) kan alleen tot enig resultaat leiden als politieke partijen en regering zich tot enkele terreinen beperken. Daarbij komt vooral in aanmerking het internationale recht, op welk gebied Nederland een goede wetenschappe-
lijke traditie heeft.