

CONCLUSION

The West New Guinea dispute was a watershed in Australia's international relations. The actions and the attitudes which flowed from the conflict strongly influenced Australian foreign policy in the period between 1950 and 1970. The WNG dispute was not a discrete problem. Rather, it saw a recurrence of two of the major problems in the history of Australia's international relations: the fear of Asian ambitions and Australia's relations with its 'great and powerful allies'. Its consequences influenced the minds and the diplomacy of Australia's officials before the dispute, during the dispute and for years after the dispute.

Australia, from 1945 to 1949, paid almost no attention to WNG, and was Indonesia's closest Western ally. From the moment that the WNG issue appeared before them, however, Australians decided that the territory was vital for their national security, and were willing to go to war with Indonesia to prevent the latter from gaining control of the territory. For a decade, Australia made an enormous effort to forestall Indonesian ambitions. But by the beginning of 1959, the government had decided that amicable relations with Indonesia were more important than control over WNG, and they quietly acquiesced to the transfer of sovereignty.

What then did WNG dispute mean for Australia?

It must be remembered, in the first instance, that Australia 'stumbled' into the dispute. Australians had no clear policy on the future of WNG in early 1949, when Johan Ariks called on them to recognise his claims for WNG exceptionalism. While Evatt did have some vague plans for the establishment of a military base in the territory, this constituted the sum total of Australia's military and diplomatic policies for WNG. When Australia's political leaders and diplomatic officials were pressed to come up with a plan for the future of WNG, they immediately and almost unanimously chose to support separation

from Indonesia. The Labor government reached this conclusion without investigating the need for Indonesian exclusion or any analysis of the probable consequences of the Australian stance. Rather, this policy appears to have been an instinctive response.

Why then did the Australians become so passionate about keeping WNG out of Indonesian control? At the time it was recognised that WNG was an economic liability and would remain so for a long period of time. Australia had no trade with the area, no investment in the area and WNG showed no prospect of producing a wealth of raw materials. Thus Australia's opposition to Indonesian control of WNG cannot be explained in terms of economics. Nor was the matter fabricated by the Australian political parties to damage their domestic opponents. Even at a time of great conflict in the Australian political system, the WNG dispute never became a matter of partisanship between the ALP or the Coalition. Indeed, throughout the entire dispute Calwell and Evatt were clearly more opposed to Indonesian control than were Menzies' ministers.

Australia wanted WNG out of Indonesian hands for a complex mix of strategic and psychological reasons. New Guinea had been of great interest to Australia for almost 70 years when the dispute broke out. It had been seen as the final barrier protecting Australia from threats from the North. But this geopolitical interest in the island does not, in itself, adequately explain the intensity of Australian opposition to Indonesian control.

Australian opposition to Indonesian control only became vehement as a result of Indonesian coercion. When Palar twice attempted to pressure Australians into changing their position by threatening the future of East New Guinea, they took the view that Indonesia was too dangerous and unstable to have a land border with Australian territory. Later attempts by Australia to justify continued Dutch rule based on the welfare of the Papuans and on self-determination were little more than a public façade for the benefit of liberal

internationalism. For while these issues were mentioned in Australian documents, they were not the prime motives for Australia's initial involvement in the dispute and they did not figure prominently, other than as useful propaganda tools, in the subsequent policy reformulations. At the heart of Australia's opposition was the belief that Indonesia, whether it was Communist or not, was an unstable and expansionist neighbour. It was, therefore, undesirable for the Indonesians to have a land border with Australian territory and to control an area many considered to be Australia's final bastion against China or a resurgent Japan. If war was necessary to keep the Indonesians out, then war it would be.

Australia ultimately forsook this position because its strategic priorities changed. In early 1959, the Australian government decided that the dispute was creating too much antagonism. At that time, they declared (at least privately) that a good relationship with Indonesia was more important than Western control over WNG. The Australians did not change their position because they now believed that the Indonesians had a valid claim to the territory. Nor did they acquiesce to the transfer of sovereignty because their 'great and powerful' allies told them to do so. They dropped their opposition to the Indonesian claim because they came to realise that continued opposition would almost certainly lead to a military conflict over the territory. And by 1959, this was unacceptable to the Australian government.

This refusal to use military force to give effect to foreign policy aims was a clear demarche from Australia's pre-1959 WNG policy. The change came about for a number of reasons. As this thesis demonstrates, the change did not come about because the Australian military deemed WNG to be less intrinsically important to Australian security; nor did it change because Australia lacked the military force to prevent a takeover. Defence reports throughout the period make it quite clear that the military believed that the retention of WNG in 'friendly' hands was vital for Australian security. Similarly,

these reports also concluded that Dutch and Australian forces could easily repel any Indonesian invasion, at that time or in the foreseeable future. Thus it was not Australia's military weakness, in itself, which prompted the reversal of Australian attitudes.

Rather, one of Australia's core concerns was the belief that if they were going to fight for WNG, they would receive no overt support from the British and no support whatsoever from the Americans. Australians feared that if they went to war, they would be jeopardising their involvement in ANZUS, ANZAM and SEATO, if not destroying the alliances themselves. They never seriously contemplated that these treaties could survive Australia's involvement in a conflict with Indonesia, or that their 'great and powerful allies' might have overriding concerns to keep these treaties in existence even if a conflict over WNG did break out. These security guarantees loomed large in the Australian mind as Southeast Asia teetered on the brink of 'Communist expansionism' in the late 1950's. By 1959, Cabinet did not consider that it was in Australia's interest to 'risk' these broader regional security arrangements, for the localised security of holding on to WNG. Even if they did 'win' a military victory in WNG, and repelled an Indonesian invasion, what would such a victory mean? At best, continued instability and anti-Australian feeling in Southeast Asia; at worst, a radicalised, and possibly Communist, Indonesia on Australia's doorstep, with no SEATO, no ANZUS and no ANZAM.

The WNG dispute disappeared rapidly from the public and the private spotlight following the transfer of sovereignty. Concern for the future of the territory and the Papuans disappeared with scarcely a trace. Today, almost nothing is heard about WNG or about the decade of diplomatic confrontation which it engendered. This was not because Australian security fears about the Indonesian occupation of WNG were shallow. Nor was it a sign of indifference about who occupied WNG. Rather, it was a recognition that the long struggle for Western control of WNG had been worse than futile - it had

been an embarrassing loss. Furthermore, the attention of the public was soon after drawn to the 'Confrontation' of Malaysia, and Australian involvement in Vietnam. The Australian government (especially with so many other regional troubles on its plate) did not want to maintain public antagonism over WNG, where it would only serve as an irritant to Australia-Indonesia relations. Ironically, this theme has its twin in the current Australian policy towards the question of East Timor.

In terms of Australia's changing relations with Britain, the WNG dispute was less important than other factors. The historical train of events which saw Australia drifting away from Britain had commenced even before the Australians considered the future of WNG. Although the Attlee government was not overly supportive of the Australian stance on WNG, it was prepared to back the Australians if they were forced to make a choice. When Churchill and Eden returned to power, the Conservatives stood four-square behind the Australians and the Dutch, and this position continued until Macmillan's time. The WNG dispute does, however, demonstrate that neither Menzies nor his government were the subservient tools of the British. On matters relating to WNG, they always put Australian interests ahead of British interests. In the early stages of the dispute Menzies was targeted by the British, who felt that he was less inflammatory about WNG than Spender. This image of malleability was soon dispelled when he repeatedly told them that Australia would be prepared to go to war to keep Indonesia out of WNG. Later, when a clear and insuperable dispute arose between the British and the Australians over the 'right of self-determination' - a matter of great importance to the diplomatic and military affairs of both nations - the Australians refused to back down, and even fought the British in the UN caucus of colonial nations.

The British, although not wishing to make the dispute their own, nevertheless supported their Australian allies. While the level of their support varied between governments, they could never be accused of working against

Australia's interests in the WNG dispute. On the contrary, Australian concerns to a large extent dictated British policy in regard to WNG. The British were not prepared to sacrifice Australian 'security interests' simply to mollify the Cold War anxieties of the US. Pemberton, in relation to WNG, wrote that "Menzie's faith in the solidarity of the English-speaking peoples against the restive natives of the world was, as over Suez, misplaced." But that presupposes that he had faith in the US and that the British betrayed Australian interests. This was not the case at all. Menzie's never fully trusted the Americans, and never had reason to doubt the British resolve to support Australia's aims.

At the core of Australia's relations with Indonesia were the difficulties surrounding the WNG dispute. By the early 1950's the stock of goodwill which Australia had accumulated through its support of Indonesian independence had come under pressure, because of Australia's active opposition to the Indonesian claims for WNG. Yet even during the periods of great tension between the two nations, the dispute seemed to be a sort of 'phoney war'. Both sides took great care to moderate their rhetoric, thereby maintaining a diplomatic, if forthright, dialogue. Australians and Australian property in Indonesia were never attacked, unlike the Dutch and their property. Australia trained Indonesian military officers, even as both sides faced the possibility of war over WNG. Neither country could afford to fight a conventional war over WNG; Jakarta because it knew that it would be defeated, Canberra because it believed that the diplomatic consequences (even of a victory) would be too damaging for Australia and the West. But the WNG dispute convinced Australians that Indonesia was unstable and expansionist. When the dispute was followed by the 'Confrontation' of Malaysia these fears appeared to be confirmed.

Even today, Indonesia continues to exert an fearful fascination over most Australians. Since the early 1980's, when Australians have been asked which nations, if any, threaten Australia's security, they have always

nominated Indonesia as the most, or second most, dangerous nation.¹ The Asian Studies Group at the University of South Australia has concluded from its research that "thirty-five per cent of Australians regarded Indonesia as a threat".² The latest poll has shown that even in a time of relative calm more than one in five Australians believe that Indonesia threatens Australia's national security,³ and even this figure is probably conservative. Yet despite (or even because of) this fear, all governments have avoided antagonising the Indonesians. Like Menzies, they know that Indonesia is too potentially dangerous to offend. Since 1949, accommodation has been the chief aim of Australian policy, and the stated objective of Australia's relations has been the improvement of defence, educational and economic links.

Without doubt the most important consequence for Australian policy to come out of the WNG dispute was their new relationship between the US. In 1949, Australia's prime defence and foreign policy ties were with Britain. Australian military strategy was still predicated upon Australia troops going to the Middle East in the event of another war. Australia's trade was largely governed by Imperial preferences. The Australian military was outfitted and organised according to British standards. But within a decade and a half this situation had been radically altered. In 1951 the ANZUS Treaty had been signed and by 1954, the 'Middle East strategy' had been abandoned. In its place was a focus upon Australia's 'forward defence' against China and Communism in Southeast Asia. The events of Suez, lamented as they were by Menzies and others, demonstrated beyond any doubt that British power had been eclipsed by the US. As a consequence, Australia's defence planners reorganised and rearmed the defence forces along American lines.

¹ Morgan Gallup Poll Finding No.1861, 9 June 1989.

² "Submission to the Inquiry into Australia's Relations with Indonesia", in Commonwealth of Australia, Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Inquiry into Australia's Relations with Indonesia, Public Submissions, 1991-2, p.S645.

³ Morgan Gallup Poll Finding No.1861, 9 June 1989.

But the new relationship with the US was not all that the Australians had hoped for, and the US proved to be a troublesome ally. Although Australia's involvement in the WNG dispute did not lead to a split with the US, it did create more than a decade of tension between the two nations. The Americans wanted to bring Indonesia on to the side of the West in the Cold War, because they believed that there were more important issues at stake in the world and the region than control over WNG. They asserted that Australia's security interests were protected by ANZUS, thus the physical control of WNG was irrelevant. Despite their public assertions, Australian officials never had a great deal of faith that ANZUS would protect Australian interests if the latter conflicted with US interests. It seems incontrovertible that this impression was strongly enhanced by the refusal of the Americans to acknowledge that Australia had a vital interest in keeping WNG out of Indonesian hands.

The ANZUS treaty, and the mythical role which it played in Australia's relations with the US, deserves further comment. The treaty was signed when the primary 'threats' to Australian security were thought to be coming from China and Indonesia, as well as Japan. The signing of the treaty did not mark the end of Australia's close relations with Britain. Nor did it mark the beginning of a period of close intimacy with the foreign and defence policies of the US. Indeed, during the 1950's the real effect of the treaty upon Australia's and America's WNG policy was negligible. The only time that ANZUS was ever used as a tool of coercion, was when the Australians invoked its moral weight to demand that the New Zealanders take a tougher position on WNG at the UN. Conversely, neither the Australians nor the Americans used its moral weight to push their views of WNG on the other. The Americans never felt obliged to support the Australian position on WNG because of the existence of ANZUS, nor were the Australians compelled to modify their policy at American insistence. WNG demonstrated to the

Australians that, ANZUS or not, the US would do whatever it wanted to do, even if that conflicted with an issue deemed fundamental to Australian security.

Despite these doubts, the Australian government made the US vital to the defence of Australia. They ultimately rejected any notion of acquiring an independent nuclear or conventional deterrent force. In doing so they also limited their scope of independent action in the arena of foreign policy. Few nations can give effect to controversial foreign policies without either a commensurate military force to back up their demands, or the support of a powerful ally. But the Australian government chose a deliberate policy of keeping the Australian defence forces weak, believing the US would protect them against its most probable enemies. They soon learned, in the WNG dispute, that without an ability to project a military force independent of the US, they were hamstrung in how far they could pursue a foreign policy independent of the US. This situation was to recur in the Indonesian confrontation of Malaysia. American vacillation over whether the terms of the ANZUS treaty covered Australian forces in Borneo upset the Australian government. But unlike the WNG dispute, the Australians did something about the situation - they reintroduced compulsory military service and increased naval defence expenditures. And they did this for a single reason: Australian planners no longer believed that the US would sacrifice its own interests and plans for the region simply to assist Australia in the objectives which it deemed to be important. It was the logical conclusion to more than a decade of American dithering about, and, ultimately, its endorsement of, the Indonesian claim.

The 'lessons' of WNG, as far of the Australians were concerned, led directly to Australian involvement in Vietnam. As has already been shown, the Australians were desperate to have the US military forces on the Asian mainland to prevent the 'southward thrust of Chinese Communism' and to

serve as a bulwark of 'forward defence' for Australia. When Laos appeared to be on the brink of collapse, Australia and the US were the only nations to support immediate military intervention. Australia wanted to be linked with the US - but at the same time it wanted the US to be doing what Australia wanted. By 1959, events in Indochina had made their desire for a forward barrier of American troops all the more urgent. The most important issue was no longer the control of WNG but the containment of Chinese Communism, and the enmeshment with American ground forces in the defence of the region. Australia could have continued to oppose the Indonesian demands, but Australian officials believed that in doing so they might have lost the Americans - and this was not something which Menzies or his ministers were prepared to do.

Australia did not change its policy because of American pressure, but from unfounded fears of diminishing US involvement in the region. This change occurred in 1959, before the Kennedy administration came to power and after Dulles had told the Australians that he would not mind if they formed an alliance with the Dutch for the defence of WNG. The Australians summed up their situation and changed their policy. They did not have to do this - and this is where arguments of Australian 'dependence' upon the US fail. As the Australian Defence Committee report of the period made quite clear, Holland had the capacity to withstand an attack by Indonesian forces, let alone a joint Australian-Dutch defence of WNG, until at least 1970. If dependence is an obligation to conform to the will of a 'superior', then Australia was not a 'dependent ally' of the US or the UK. It chose to associate itself with Britain and America. People who are dependent cannot be free to chose - in fact, freedom and dependency are opposite and irreconcilable terms. Menzies subsequent attempt to shift the responsibility for Australia's change of policy on to the US⁴ was little more than a feint to draw criticism away from the

⁴ Meaney, *Australia and the World*, p.648.

actions of Barwick and the attitude of the majority of his own Cabinet. Why take the blame, when you can blame the Americans?

Australia ultimately chose its own path. The Menzies Cabinet believed that a greater good would accrue from acquiescing in the Indonesian takeover of WNG. The only other option was to prolong a dispute which, even if it did not escalate into a politically 'unwinnable' war, would have destabilised the region and made it harder to stop Communist expansionism. Their simplistic theories of 'falling dominoes' and Communist expansionism in the region were wrong, but they chose what they believed to be best for Australia. Menzies wanted the US and the UK to adopt a policy which would protect Australian interests - and in this respect he was no different to any other Australian leader before or after him.

This thesis commenced with the assertion that "the history of Australian foreign policy is the history of Australia's search for security in the Pacific". Australia's involvement in the WNG dispute demonstrates the veracity of this statement. Australians entered the dispute because, caught off guard, they believed that it was better to keep the territory in the hands of a Western nation. They resolved to oppose the Indonesian claims because the latter explicitly threatened Australian New Guinea. They supported the Dutch - and annoyed their allies, the US and UK - because they were not prepared to hand over the strategically important territory of WNG to an unstable, nationalist government. They supported self-determination, not for the welfare of the Papuans, but because it would deny the area to a potential aggressor. And ultimately they withdrew from the dispute because they believed that Australia's security was dependent more upon the enmeshment with the US in the region, than it was on the retention of WNG in Western hands. Australian diplomacy in the WNG dispute was the product of a logical, albeit flawed, view of the 'dangers' in the region and the search for security amidst the tumult in Southeast Asia.