

## **Sukarno and Colonialism: An Analysis of Indonesia's Foreign Policy Discourse, 1955-1961**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*For the most part, the literature about Indonesia's foreign policy does not stray far from a descriptive and chronological presentation of the subject. The fact of the matter is that an in-depth analysis of the nation's foreign policy from a different era will impart valuable lessons to the current policymakers in charge of formulating and implementing such a policy. The era of Sukarno bore witness to the implementation of Indonesia's foreign policy that was strong in ideas and practices. Employing discourse analysis, this article seeks to analyze five of Sukarno's speeches, which were delivered in various international forums from 1955 to 1963. During that time, Indonesia put forward a coherent and consistent foreign policy with colonialism as its master signifier. The promotion of such a discourse contributed positively to the diplomatic effort on the issue of West Papua by mobilizing supports from Asian-African nations, as well as attracting the interest of the superpowers. As a result, Indonesia's national interest to bring West Papua into the Republic was well served, and furthermore, Indonesia succeeded in enhancing its image, role, and leadership in world affairs. This experience presents a challenge to the contemporary policymakers in producing a configuration of strong ideas and concepts that would allow the implementation of a foreign policy that serves the national interest, when the nation has once again risen as an important player on international affairs.*

**Keywords:** Indonesian foreign policy; Sukarno; anti-colonialism; West Papua

### **ABSTRAK**

Tidak banyak literatur kebijakan luar negeri Indonesia (KLNI) yang menyajikan lebih dari sekedar paparan deskriptif dan kronologis. Padahal, analisis mendalam akan pelaksanaan kebijakan luar negeri di berbagai era mampu memberikan berbagai pelajaran berharga terlebih bagi para pelaksana kebijakan kini. Era Sukarno menjadi saksi atas pelaksanaan KLNI yang kuat pada tataran gagasan dan praktis. Dengan metode analisis diskursus, tulisan ini menganalisis lima pidato Sukarno di berbagai forum internasional dalam kurun waktu 1955 – 1963. Tulisan ini menemukan bahwa saat itu, Indonesia muncul dengan diskursus kebijakan luar negeri yang koheren dan konsisten dengan kolonialisme sebagai *master signifier*. Promosi diskursus tersebut berkontribusi positif pada usaha diplomasi Irian Barat melalui dukungan solidaritas Asia-Afrika dan tertariknya negara-negara adidaya untuk terlibat. Sebagai akibatnya, kepentingan nasional atas kembalinya Irian Barat terlayani dengan baik dan lebih dari itu, Indonesia berhasil meningkatkan citra, peran dan kepemimpinannya dalam urusan-urusan dunia. Pengalaman tersebut menjadi tantangan bagi para pengambil kebijakan di era kontemporer untuk mampu menghasilkan suatu konfigurasi ide dan gagasan yang kuat demi membuat pelaksanaan kebijakan luar negeri yang mampu melayani kepentingan nasional dengan baik di saat Indonesia sekali lagi muncul sebagai aktor penting dalam panggung internasional.

**Kata kunci:** Kebijakan luar negeri Indonesia; Sukarno; anti-kolonialisme; Irian Barat

## Introduction

The mid 1950s was an important milestone with regard to Sukarno's domination in Indonesia's foreign policy processes.<sup>1</sup> Sukarno gradually stepped away from the constitutional boundaries of liberal democracy and became a central figure in the nation's diplomacy after consolidating his political power in domestic affairs. The country's foreign policy was then strongly embodied in his persona and presence in various international forums and events.

Under Sukarno's leadership, Indonesia's foreign policy conduct was characterized by a strong anti-colonialism sentiment.<sup>2</sup> Demonstrating such an attitude towards colonialism through the country's diplomacy was perceived as the action that perfectly embodied the national ideology.<sup>3</sup> The nation's foreign policy conduct with its thick anti-colonialism nuances was then presented with some focused policies, one of which was the struggle to gain sovereignty over West Papua. For John Reinhardt, this anti-colonialism view in the country's foreign policy had substantially contributed to Indonesia's, and especially Sukarno's, growing importance in the international stage as the leader of Asian and African nations.<sup>4</sup>

This article maintains that Indonesia's increasing role and leadership in the world stage were deliberate and intentional. This view is adopted by the post-structuralism in International Relations. This school of thought proposes a notion that the reality of international politics is constructed rather than given. Meanwhile, power is the element that defines the reality of international politics.<sup>5</sup> It can be said that the interpretation of a particular terminology or event at international level is not done without some underlying power political interests. As such, the post-structuralists focus on the efforts to unveil the interests within power politics that provides a shape to an international event; and how words are used to narrate the event, thus enabling the narrative to contribute positively to the interests.

In light of such an understanding, and by employing a method of discourse analysis<sup>6</sup>, this paper endeavors to map out how the various ideas about the reality of international politics are narrated and promoted in international forums as part of a strategy in diplomacy.<sup>7</sup> This paper analyzes five of Sukarno's speeches derived from the collection of Indonesian National Archives (*Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia*). These speeches were delivered in five international forums within the period from 1955 to 1961. The first was the opening address to the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference (AAC) in Bandung, Indonesia. The second was the "To Build the World Anew", which was delivered before the 15th session of United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1960. Next was a speech entitled "For Liberty and Justice", which was delivered before The Council for World Affairs in Los Angeles, April 1961.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Leifer, *Indonesia's foreign policy*. London: George Allen & Unwin for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Weinstein F.B., The uses of foreign policy in Indonesia: an approach to the analysis of foreign policy in the less developed countries. *World Politics*, 24, 356-381. 1972. doi: 10.2307/2009754; Anwar, D. F. Indonesia's Foreign Policy After the Cold War. In D. Singh (Ed.). *Southeast Asian Affairs 1994*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994; Sukma, Rizal. The evolution of Indonesia's foreign policy: an Indonesian view," *Asian Survey*, 35, 304-315, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Subandrio. *Indonesia on the march volume II*. Jakarta: Department of foreign affairs, 1963.

<sup>4</sup> J.M. Reinhardt, *Foreign policy and national integration: the case of Indonesia*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies. 1971.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Devetak, Post-Structuralism. In S. Burchill and A. Linklater (Eds.). *Theories of International Relations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> J.P. Gee, *An introduction to discourse analysis: theory & method*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Carlsnaes, Foreign Policy. In Walter Carlsnaes, et. al. (Eds.). *Handbook of International Relations*. London: SAGE Publications, 2002.

Then it was followed by a speech delivered before The Asia-Africa Solidarity Council in Bandung, April 1961, and finally, it was the speech delivered at the inaugural summit of the Non-Alignment Movement in Belgrade, September 1961.

Examining these speeches, this article attempts to illustrate the importance of a coherent and consistent discourse in supporting the implementation of a nation's foreign policy to benefit the national interests. This article contends that at that time, Indonesia emerged as a powerful international actor in terms of the ideas it proposed and was quite an expert in managing the strategy to deal with the dynamics of international relations. As a result, the national interest to return the territory of West Papua to the Republic of Indonesia was well served and more than that, Indonesia succeeded in enhancing its image, role, and leadership in the world affairs.

This article has been divided into four parts. The first part maps out Indonesia's then foreign policy discourse. I shall show that the establishment of Asia-Africa solidarity and the internationalization of the issue of West Papua were the two main objectives of Sukarno's efforts to promote such a foreign policy discourse. These objectives were achieved by placing the term of colonialism as the master signifier and setting aside the issues pertaining to the Cold War, which was then the dominant reality in international politics.

The second section outlines the mapping of the foreign policy discourse by reviewing secondary data on the Indonesia's West Irian diplomacy. This article argues that the promotion of a mapped discourse provided a positive contribution to the diplomatic efforts on West Irian through the support of Asian-African nations and the involvement of both the US and the Soviet Union. The third section shows that efforts at the level of ideas and practices provide positive contribution to the national interests. In the final section, this article presents its conclusion, reflecting the findings with regard to Indonesia's current foreign policy conduct.

### **Colonialism as a Master Signifier and Asia-Africa Solidarity in Indonesia's Foreign Policy Discourse (1955-1963)**

“Then, I beg you not to think about colonialism only in the classical form, as it is known by the Indonesians and also by our brothers and sisters from various parts of Asia and Africa. Colonialism also has its modern form, namely in the form of economic control, intellectual control, and direct physical control by a small group of foreigners in a nation. It [colonialism] is a very skilled and persistent enemy and it [colonialism] appears in various forms. It [colonialism] does not give up easily. Wherever, whenever, and however they appear, colonialism is an evil thing, and must be eliminated from the face of the earth.”

Sukarno, 18 April 1955.

The above excerpt is taken from the text of Sukarno's speech when he opened the Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung in 1955. Through this single paragraph, Sukarno brought about a series of things that were related to the formation of a discourse. It was an important move on his part to create a coherent, consistent, and long-lasting foreign policy, which was actively promoted throughout the era of his administration as the first Indonesian president.

It can be said that the most important thing that provides a significant contribution to the discourse is the placement of colonialism as the master signifier. This word has more than enough capital to carry out such a role because it is placed on top of a strong historical foundation. In the above speech, Sukarno emphasized that as a formerly colonized nation, Indonesia, like many other Asian and African nations, knew what colonialism was all about. Using such a discursive means, Sukarno

proclaimed himself as the authoritative source to talk about colonialism, and thus, the legitimate leader of the newly independent countries.

Nonetheless, Sukarno did not deny that those Asian and African nations were exposed to different forms and shapes of colonialism. Therefore, to maximize its impact, the very meaning and use of the word colonialism were restricted to a context specifically built for that purpose. To do that, as shown in the excerpt above, Sukarno was deliberately constricting the definition of colonialism into three simple points, i.e. colonialism is a form of economic control, intellectual control, and physical control exerted by a small group of foreigners within a territory of a nation. The simplification of the definition was crucial in determining the coverage of the produced discourse, in the sense to what extent the meaning of colonialism was used in the discourse.

In addition to limiting its meaning, the roles of colonialism in the dynamics of international relations were also restricted. In the analyzed speeches, colonialism was mainly referred to as “a source of tension or dispute”, “a great and growing threat against peace.” Attaching such attributes to colonialism was a way to bring colonialism into a head-on collision with the concept of sovereignty.

How Sukarno assigned a meaning to the concept can be found in his New York speech. For him, sovereignty means that nations must have the same and equal positions when it comes to international affairs. At the heart of this concept, as he further conveyed, is the basic right of every nation to determine its own destiny. In this context, colonialism can be seen as an infringement of the sovereignty of every nation in the world, and thus a source of threat to world peace. As such, colonialism is the common enemy of sovereign states because it violates the most fundamental principle of relation between states.

Sukarno saw that “colonialism is not yet dead” because “there are still numerous regions in Asia and Africa that have not gained

independence yet.” Based on this, he proposed an action-oriented motion that had an objective to eliminate colonialism from the face of the earth. He also emphasized the “need to work together” to achieve this goal. One question then emerged regarding to who should take this collective action. Sukarno believed that the answer to such a question is the Asian and African nations that were either the colonized nations or the newly independent ones. As such, what was central to his speeches was the narratives to nurture a form of solidarity among those nations. In one of his speeches, he even emphasized that he “spoke on behalf of [his] brothers in Asia and Africa”. In making this claim, he represented himself as the leader of Asian and African nations, aiming to end colonialism.

In the analyzed speeches, some discursive means were apparently being used to ensure these speeches' positive contribution to Sukarno's efforts in fostering Asian-African solidarity. Firstly, the words “Asia” and “Africa” were placed side by side or referred to as a union as in “Asia-Africa.” Second, Sukarno used the pronouns “we” and “us” when referring to Asian-African nations in the presence of other nations in international forums. Third, he was translating the unity of Asia-Africa based on the shared experiences as formerly colonized nations. Fourth, he highlighted the distinctiveness of Asian-African identity as the “Third Bloc” that did not stand behind both “the Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence” (the Western Bloc) and “the Communist Manifesto of Karl Marx” (the Eastern Bloc).

The use of these four discursive means brings about the emergence of the binary narrative of “us versus them.” Whereas the shared experience of being formerly colonized nations is the key component of the in-group identity, the credential as colonial powers determines who belongs to the out-group. In this regard, Sukarno included Western countries to the out-group as he was convinced that “colonialism is the fruit of the Western system.” Such a created binary opposition

further underlies a call for Asian-African nations to join a "collective struggle" against colonialism, and thus, the West.

In this speech, Sukarno also argued that the joint efforts to oppose colonialism was a "historical inevitability" (*keniscayaan sejarah*). Based on this, the meaning of anti-colonialism struggle in the foreign policy discourse of Sukarno's Indonesia had been fixed. It was regarded as something that would surely occur and could not be impeded, as well as something that was always "justified and right." As Sukarno said, "Move with the flow of history; do not try to stem the current" (*bergeraklah bersama arusnya sejarah; janganlah mencoba membendung arus itu*). These views provided the necessary pretexts for and even strengthened the antagonism between formerly colonized nations and the Western countries. Moreover, it eventually contributed to the efforts to bring together and consolidate the Asian-African solidarity.

The configuration and linkage of the aforementioned concepts and ideas had made Indonesia's foreign policy discourse built by Sukarno emerge as an alternative way to think about international politics of his era. As far as the source of threat to international stability was concerned, he pointed to neither the heightened tension created by the nuclear arms race nor the competition between the Eastern and Western Blocs to expand their sphere of influence. As he stated in his New York speech, "Talking about disarmament is indeed good. However, let us be realistic, even an implementation of a disarmament agreement will not be a guarantee for peace on Earth." In this context, it appears that Sukarno did not subscribe to the international reality of the Cold War. He instead opted for building his own version of reality in which the practice of colonialism was regarded as the root of tension among states. As he reiterated in Belgrade, the source of international tension and strife was not an "ideological conflict between the superpowers", but an attempt by the colonial powers to subjugate and prevent colonized nations from gaining their full independence.

Within the context of this alternative discourse, the dispute between Indonesia and the Netherlands on West Irian gained more prominence, thanks to the discursive means that linked this issue with colonialism as the discourse's master signifier. The issue was not represented merely as territorial disputes between both countries. It was rather portrayed as an obvious manifestation of how one colonial power relentlessly sought to carry out the practice of colonialism by undermining another nation's independence. Speaking in New York on the subject, Sukarno said that in West Irian, Indonesia saw how "a colonial sword was thrust to [the country]." Then in Los Angeles, he said something similar, where he stressed the significance of West Irian to the nation, "At present, West Irian—one fifth of our national territory—is still under colonialism."

Since the issue of West Irian stemmed from colonialism, which was seen as the source of threat to the world peace, the issue could not be regarded merely as the bilateral problem between the Indonesians and the Dutch. For Sukarno, the issue was rather part of the international problems. As he stated in Los Angeles, "It is in the interests of the world not to let [the Dutch occupation in West Irian] continue." "The colonial sword," as he further stated, "was not only aimed at Indonesia, but it also threatens the world peace." Sukarno even conveyed that Indonesia in dealing with the issue vowed to do everything in its power, including "confronting armed forces with armed forces, threats with threats." In this, he emphasized that "the situation in West Irian is quite dangerous, an explosive condition, a cause of tension, and a threat to peace." By portraying the West Irian issue as the one that could trigger an armed conflict between nations, Sukarno arguably attempted to attract wider international attention. He was particularly interested in attracting that of the United Nations, an international institution whose aim is at preserving the world peace.

It can thus be seen that Sukarno sought to build a discourse through which Indonesia attempted to persuade as many as possible

members of international community, especially the Asian–African nations, to take favorable stance on Indonesia's interests on the issue of West Papua. The discursive strategy was directed to first promote solidarity among these formerly colonized nations and to convince them to join the collective struggle against colonialism. The issue of West Irian was then framed as the problem of colonialism, which was already portrayed as a source of international tension. Consequently, the issue was further depicted as part of international problems, rather than an issue solely between Indonesia and the Netherlands. As such, Sukarno framed countries that took unfavorable attitude to Indonesia's interests on the issue as the proponents of the practice of colonialism, and thus, the threats to the world peace.

The following section describes Indonesia's West Irian diplomacy in the period during which the discourse presented above predominated how Indonesian leaders thought about its foreign policy conduct. The description provides a context in which the need for such a foreign policy discourse would be more comprehensively understood. It was apparent that the need arose following the Indonesian great frustration over the lack of progress of their bilateral negotiation with the Dutch to solve the issue.

### Implementation of West Irian Diplomacy (1950-1963)

The West Irian dispute was originated from the results of the Round Table Conference that took place in late 1949.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> Central Intelligence Group, *Basic Dutch-Indonesian Issues and Linggadjati Agreement*, [https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000256979.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000256979.pdf) [Accessed April 10, 2020]; Webster, David. "... SAMPAI MERAUKE": the struggle for West Guinea, 1960–62. Master theses, University of British Columbia, 1999; Roadnight, Andrew. *United States policy towards Indonesia in the Truman and Eisenhower years*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002; Chauvel, Richard and Bhakti, I.R. *The Papua conflict: Jakarta's*

Dutch and the Indonesians agreed to give way to an immediate transfer of sovereignty from the former to the latter by excluding the territory from the process. In this, both parties decided to postpone the settlement of the status of territory.

What then followed was prolonged bilateral negotiation between the Indonesians and the Dutch, because the latter was absolutely determined to maintain its sovereignty claim over West Irian. Therefore, no agreement was achieved, even three years after the Conference, despite both sides having committed—as stated in the Conference's results—to settle their dispute over the territory within a period of only one year.<sup>9</sup>

The lack of progress in the bilateral negotiations prompted a shift in the country's strategy in dealing with the issue was highly desirable. The signs for changes then started to appear following the rise of Prime Minister Ali Sastroamijoyo to power in August 1953. Unlike his predecessors—the previous Prime Ministers Natsir, Sukiman, and Wilopo, Prime Minister Sastroamijoyo eventually decided to make use of the multilateral channels in trying to solve the West Irian dispute.<sup>10</sup> The issue was then brought to international forums. As the nation celebrated the ninth anniversary of its independence, the Indonesian government formally submitted "The Question of West Irian" into the agenda of discussion at the Ninth UN General Assembly.<sup>11</sup>

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*perceptions and policies*. Washington, D.C.: East-West Center Washington, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> R. C. Bone Jr., *The dynamics of the Western Guinea (Irian Barat) problem*. New York: Cornell University Department of Far Eastern Studies Southeast Asia Program, 1958; Feith, Herbert. *The Wilopo cabinet 1952 - 1953: a turning point in post-revolutionary Indonesia*. Singapore: Equinox Publishing, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> N.M. Viviany, *Australian Attitudes and Policies towards Indonesia, 1950 to 1965*. PhD Diss., Australian National University, 1973; Leifer, Michael. *Indonesia's foreign policy*.

<sup>11</sup> John Saltford, *The United Nations and the Indonesian takeover of West Papua, 1962 – 1969: The anatomy of betrayal*. London: Routledge-Curzon, 2003.

The debate over the status of West Irian began in November 1954, in the General Assembly's First Committee that dealt with disarmament and international security. In this first attempt, Indonesia was particularly unsuccessful. It submitted a draft resolution that would ensure the UN's deep entanglement in the issue so that it would continue to deserve worldwide attention. No adequate support was shown for this draft in the Committee. An alternative draft that "did not go as far" as the initial draft proposed by Indonesia was then introduced.<sup>12</sup> It merely expressed the hope that both parties would settle the dispute in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter, while at the same time requesting them to update the Assembly on the progress of the dispute settlement at its next session. Since such a compromise draft obtained adequate support, the Committee gave the draft its endorsement to be further discussed at the Assembly's plenary session. It should be noted, nevertheless, that the draft was eventually rejected by the Assembly, since it did not receive a two-thirds majority vote (see Table 1).

As the table also indicates, the strongest support for a UN resolution on the Question of West Irian was shown by the Asian-Africa bloc. This, however, should not obscure the fact that their views on the issue differed from the ones of Indonesia, thereby making the Bloc's support for the Indonesia's interests was far from solid.<sup>13</sup> India and Syria, for example, were among eight countries that submitted the aforementioned alternative draft resolution. Unlike Indonesia, they believed that the matter was bilateral in nature and the UN should remain away from the dispute settlement process. It turned out that such a draft was supported by the majority of Asian-African members. Seeking to prevent the Bloc from splitting up, Indonesia then withdrew its

own draft resolution, which was submitted earlier to the First Committee.

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<sup>12</sup> Colin Brown, Indonesia's West Irian Case in the UN General Assembly, 1954 (pp. 268). *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 7(3), 260-274. 1976.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

**Table 1. Voting Results on West Irian's Issues in UN General Assembly (1954 – 1957)**

(The Blocs of) Countries	Vote taken in UNGA's Plenary Session <sup>14</sup>								
	1954			1956			1957		
	+	-	A	+	-	A	+	-	A
Asia-Africa	16	1	-	24	1	2	25	1	2
Western	1	13	-	1	17	2	1	18	1
Soviet	5	-	-	8	-	-	9	-	-
Latin America	10	7	3	6	6	7	5	9	6
United States of America	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	1
Others	1	2	-	1	1	1	1	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>11</b>
<sup>2</sup> / <sub>3</sub> Required Majority	<b>40</b>			<b>53</b>			<b>55</b>		

Source: Bone Jr., 1958; Reindhart, 1971.

<sup>14</sup> The symbol “+” means in favor; “-“, against; and the word “A” means abstaining.



Moreover, the Bloc's unity was challenged by Colombia's proposal to amend the alternative draft. It argued that any UNGA's resolution on the Question of West Irian should acknowledge the importance for the dispute settlement process to hear the voices of the territory's inhabitants. To Indonesia, the enactment of such a resolution could be counterproductive to its interests on maintaining the country's sovereignty claim over the territory. Indeed, Colombia's proposal created dilemma for most of Asian-African states. While they were willing "to maintain their solidarity with Indonesia on the general question," they also wanted to assert its anti-colonialist credential, "which had caused them to center their collective UN efforts on establishing the right of all dependent peoples to determine their own fate, free from outside interference."<sup>15</sup> This time, however, most of Asian-African states opted for backing Indonesia up by rejecting the Colombia's proposal.

Indonesia's efforts to promote Asian-African solidarity had in fact begun at the Colombo Conference in spring 1954. The Conference was originally planned to only include four former British colonies: Burma, Ceylon, India, and Pakistan. The host, Prime Minister Kotelawala, then extended the invitation to Indonesia, thanks to the suggestion from Prime Minister Nehru of India.<sup>16</sup> Besides discussing the issue of the atomic bomb, the situation in Indochina and Korea, as well as the status of the PRC at the UN, the Conference was also the place for these five Asian powers to express their anti-colonialist stances.<sup>17</sup> This was while they were vocal in supporting the right of self-determination for nations that were still under colonial rule. Taking advantage of his presence

in Colombo, Indonesian Prime Minister Sastroamijoyo proposed to expand the Conference's participants to also include the members of the UN from Asia-Africa Bloc. While Pakistan and Ceylon welcomed Indonesia's proposal, India and Burma opined that such an idea might create antipathy to the Conference itself.<sup>18</sup> Following the visits of Prime Minister Sastroamijoyo to New Delhi and Rangoon in September 1954, Prime Minister Nehru and Prime Minister Nu declared their support for the idea to bring together Asia and African nations in a conference.

The Colombo powers were regrouped in Bogor, Indonesia in December 1954. In this preparatory meeting for the Asian-African Conference, Prime Minister Sastroamijoyo reportedly insisted that condemnation of colonialism must be seen as one of the reasons for the gathering of these nations.<sup>19</sup> The discussion about the practices of colonialism that were still carried out in many Asian and African nations also led the attention of the five prime ministers to the issue of West Irian. The Bogor Conference in turn became the place for the Colombo powers to express their support for Indonesia's position on the issue. Prime Minister Mohammed Ali of Pakistan even declared publicly his support, saying: "We strongly condemn colonialism wherever it exists and we sympathize with your attitude to the Irian question."<sup>20</sup>

Indonesia further exploited its position as the host of the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference (AAC) to attract wider international attention on the issue of West Irian. President Sukarno did not waste the opportunity given to him to open the conference. Delivering his opening address before delegations from 29 nations, Sukarno was rather keen to emphasize more on the issue of colonialism, and the imperative of

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 269.

<sup>16</sup> Cindy Ewing, *The Colombo Powers: crafting diplomacy in the Third World and launching Afro-Asia at Bandung*. *Cold War History*, 19 (1), 1-19, 2018. doi: 10.1080/14682745.2018.1500553.

<sup>17</sup> I. J. The Colombo Conference: Neutrality the Keynote. *The World Today*, 10(7), 293-300, 1954.

<sup>18</sup> Cindy Ewing, *The Colombo Powers*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> B.D Arora, *Pakistan's role in Indian-Indonesian relations during the Soekarno era*. *International Studies*, 14(2), 219-250, 1975. doi: 10.1177/002088177501400202

anti-colonialism struggle, and the solidarity of Asia-African nations. For Cindy Ewing, "Sukarno was far more concerned with the ongoing dispute with the Netherlands over West Irian and emphasized the need to help liberation movements."<sup>21</sup> Indonesia can be seen as successful in gathering wider international support for its position in the issue. In the Conference's Final Communiqué, two paragraphs were dedicated for the issue stating:

The Asian-African Conference, in the context of its expressed attitude on the abolition of colonialism, supported the position of Indonesia in the case of West Irian based on the relevant agreements between Indonesia and the Netherlands.

The Asian-African Conference urged the Netherlands Government to reopen negotiations as soon as possible, to implement their obligations under the above-mentioned agreements and expressed the earnest hope that the United Nations would assist the parties concerned in finding a peaceful solution to the dispute.<sup>22</sup>

Covered by 400 foreign journalists, the AAC became the world's spotlight and Indonesia gained a respectable place on the maps of world politics.<sup>23</sup> However, the real success that should be underlined was the success in gathering international public support to see the issue of West Irian from the framework of resistance movement against colonialism. Moreover, as seen in the excerpt of the Conference's Final Communiqué above, the Conference even took favorable stances on Indonesia's sovereignty claim on West Irian and the country's effort to bring the UN into the dispute settlement process.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Final Communiqué of the Asian-African conference of Bandung (24 April 1955), accessed March 19, 2020, [http://www.bandungspirit.org/IMG/pdf/Final\\_Communique\\_Bandung\\_1955.pdf](http://www.bandungspirit.org/IMG/pdf/Final_Communique_Bandung_1955.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Michael Leifer, *Indonesia's Foreign Policy*.

These positive outputs from the Bandung Conference brought about the impression that Indonesia would obtain better results from its endeavors in the UNGA in debates over West Irian. On 10 August 1955, Indonesia, together with Burma, India, Pakistan, and eleven other Asian-African countries, submitted a letter requesting that the question of West Irian should be discussed in the tenth session of the General Assembly.

It should be noted, however, that a political change took place in Indonesia as Burhanuddin Harahap replaced Ali Sastroamijoyo as a prime minister. The former abandoned the latter's anti-West polices to gather more support from the Western Bloc in the UN. He then pursued a policy of rapprochement with the Dutch, persuading them to return to the negotiating table.

The Dutch initially responded to a policy like this with reluctance, especially because Indonesia was not willing to withdraw its request to the UNGA for the inclusion of the issue of West Irian in the Assembly's agenda. On 10 December 1955, however, Indonesia and the Netherlands resumed their bilateral talks. In light of this development, on December 12, India and Syria, together with three countries outside the Asia-Africa Bloc, submitted a joint draft resolution. The draft was designed to express the Assembly's hopes that the dispute would be peacefully resolved and the negotiations between Indonesia and the Netherlands would be fruitful. The First Committee then unanimously accepted the draft, which was further approved by a plenary session with acclamation.

Following another deadlock in Indo-Dutch bilateral negotiation, in October 1956, the Colombo powers and eleven other Asian-African countries again requested the UNGA to include the Question of West Irian in the agenda of its eleventh session. Thirteen countries, nine of which were Asian-African ones, sponsored a joint draft resolution requesting the UN Secretary-General to establish a committee of good offices and asking the committee to report back to the

Assembly. This was proposed to ensure that the dispute could be settled peacefully. Unfortunately, this draft was not eventually adopted as the UNGA's resolution as it failed to gather the minimum two-thirds of the vote (Table 1).

An effort like this was repeated at the Twelfth UN General Assembly and it again failed. This time, 21 Asian-African countries asked the UNGA to include the Question of West Irian in its deliberations. A joint draft resolution was proposed requesting, among which, the UN Secretary-General himself "to assist the parties concerned, as he deems it appropriate, in the implementation of this resolution." Despite the fact that Indonesia always had almost a full support from Asian-African nations, it was still unable to meet the required  $\frac{2}{3}$  majority for the UNGA to adopt a resolution (Table 1). Based on this result, Indonesian Foreign Minister Subandrio stated that the UN was not a suitable channel for resolving the issue of West Irian and that was Indonesia's last endeavor to prompt the UNGA to adopt a resolution on the issue.<sup>24</sup>

Indonesia's constant failure at the UN and the deadlocks bilateral talks with the Dutch ultimately thrust Sukarno into the center stage as the dominant figure in the country's overall effort to solve the issue of West Irian.<sup>25</sup> The country then started to build massive military power, believing that diplomatic solution was no longer achievable. Missions were sent to the US and the Soviet Union to negotiate arms deals. While the White House until 1957 rejected twice Indonesia's requests, the Kremlin and the rest of Eastern Bloc welcomed them.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Bone Jr., R.C. *The Dynamics of the Western Guinea (Irian Barat) Problem*.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Chauvel and I.R. Bhakti, *The Papua conflict: Jakarta's perceptions and policies*; Lundry, Chris. *Separatism and State Cohesion in Eastern Indonesia*. PhD Diss., Arizona State University, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Audrey Kahin, and Kahin, G.M. *Subversion as foreign policy: The secret Eisenhower and Dulles debacle in Indonesia*. Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1997.

In response to the rapid flow of arms from the Eastern Bloc to Indonesia, the US President Dwight Eisenhower in December 1958 agreed to provide military assistance valued at 15 million US dollars. By the end of 1959, the total assistance from the Western Bloc countries had surpassed the value of assistance from the Eastern Bloc countries. However, a visit by the leader of Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, in February 1960, which was followed by General Nasution's mission to Moscow in 1961, after once again rejected by President Eisenhower, changed the balance. The accumulation of arms credits from the Soviet Union made Indonesia in 1962, the largest non-Communist country that received military assistance from the Eastern Bloc countries with a credit value of 1.5 billion US dollars.<sup>27</sup>

Sukarno further upped the ante with his multilateral diplomatic maneuvers by bringing the issue of West Irian to the First Summit of Non-Aligned Movement. The meeting was held when Cold War tensions were escalating due to the Berlin Crisis and Soviet nuclear tests. Indonesia, nevertheless, tried to make the conference focusing on issues of territorial disputes that grew from colonialism, such as issues on Angola, Algeria, Congo, and West Irian. Sukarno, according to Frederick Bunnell, claimed that the source of world tension at that time was not in Berlin but in regions such as Angola and West Irian.<sup>28</sup>

Indonesia's presence in Belgrade attracted the attention of US press because of its role in initiating the AAC in Bandung six years earlier. *The Times* opined that Sukarno's speech was quite surprising because he did not make any comment on the upcoming Soviet nuclear test, while his statement on the Berlin Crisis was clearly pro-Soviet.<sup>29</sup> *The Times*, *The*

<sup>27</sup> W. A. Redfern, *Sukarno's guided democracy and takeovers of foreign companies in Indonesia in the 1960s*. PhD Diss., University of Michigan, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> F. P. Bunnell, *American reactions to Indonesia's role in the Belgrade conference*. Singapore: Equinox Publishing, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

*Post*, and *The Herald Tribune* all noted that the main point conveyed by Sukarno in Belgrade was revolved around the importance of struggle against colonialism. Moreover, they also described Sukarno as a pro-communist and a militant anti-colonial activist.

Sukarno's efforts to involve the US in West Irian's issue came to fruition when Indonesia received the support from the White House during the era of President John F. Kennedy. For Kennedy, the issue might complicate US position in Southeast Asia with regard to its relations with the Soviet Union, by adding another point of conflict besides Vietnam.<sup>30</sup> To prevent this from happening, President Kennedy appointed his younger brother, the US Attorney General, Robert Kennedy as a negotiator to facilitate the negotiation between Indonesians and the Dutch. In August 1962, the opposing parties finally met to sign an agreement in New York. Afterwards, the Dutch handed over the disputed territory to the United Nations Temporary Executive Authority (UNTEA) on October 1, 1962. Then, on May 1, 1963, UNTEA turned West Irian to the Indonesian government. At that point, the diplomacy which took place for almost 14 years to bring West Irian to the Republic came to an end.

### **Analysis**

The previous two sections have mapped the foreign policy discourse of Sukarno's Indonesia and described the use of diplomacy, especially the multilateral one, to address the issue of West Irian. The promotion of the discourse at the global level and Indonesia's foreign policy activism had positively contributed to Indonesia's international standing. The country was therefore known as the leader of Asia-Africa, the staunch advocate of anti-colonialism struggle, and the champion of non-alignment.

From the perspective of post-structuralism, foreign policy could also be seen as a discursive tool utilized by states to claim power and authority. As such, through foreign policy, states attempt to create their own version of international politics, the one that would serve best its national interests. Based on this understanding, this study then seeks to show the ways in which the foreign policy discourse of Sukarno's Indonesia was closely related to the ups and downs in the country's efforts to address the issue of West Irian.

Indonesia's foreign policy activism only emerged after Jakarta decided to internationalize the issue of West Irian following the lack of progress in the negotiations with the Dutch from 1950 to 1953. The Indonesian government, by chance, did not have to wait too long to shift from bilateral to multilateral channels. It rode the wave of the efforts initiated to promote Asian Voice in the international discussions on Asian Affairs, which were realized through the 1954 Colombo Conference. Upon the invitation to this Conference, Indonesia did not waste the opportunity to propose the idea of expanding the Conference which included African nations that started gaining independence in the early 1950s. Following some diplomatic efforts made by Prime Minister Sastroamijoyo and a follow-up conference in Bogor, a gathering of 29 Asian and African nations could then be organized in Bandung. In this Conference, Indonesia, the host, took the advantage of the anti-colonialism sentiment already shared by Asian-African nations, attracting their support to the situation it faced as regard to the Dutch occupation in West Irian.

Sukarno made the best of the opportunity given to him to deliver the opening address at the Bandung Conference by starting to promote a discourse, within which colonialism was put as a master signifier. Indonesia and Sukarno, as a postcolonial state and a former leader of anti-colonialism struggle, had enough credential to exploit the word colonialism in the discourse they

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<sup>30</sup> Pierre Van der Eng, *Konfrontasi and Australia's Aid to Indonesia during the 1960s*. ANU College of Business and Economics School of Management, Marketing and International Business, 2008.

promoted. Additionally, the discourse also fit best with the international audience before Sukarno at the Conference. The experience of being colonized was shared by most Asian and African nations, despite the differences they have in terms of culture, political system, or ideology. In this, the discourse was seemingly aimed at connecting as many as possible countries from these two different regions and further fostering solidarity among them.

For post-structuralists, however, it is not the desire to promote anti-colonialism struggle per se that motivated Indonesia to put much efforts in realizing the Bandung Conference. It can also be said that fostering Asian-African solidarity was certainly not the end goal of Indonesia's foreign policy activism during the Sukarno era. What were then the underlying interests that Sukarno's Indonesia intended to ultimately serve by creating a foreign policy discourse that promoted anti-colonialism struggle, and thus, Asian-African unity?

As described above, Indonesia started to put forward the idea to connect Asian and African nations only after it decided to bring the issue of West Irian to the UN. A conference that facilitated direct exchanges among those countries was clearly needed particularly following Indonesia's failure to mobilize complete support for its draft resolution on the issue of West Irian from the Asia Africa Bloc in UNGA's ninth session in 1954. Based on this, it is safe to argue that Indonesia's foreign policy discourse was shaped by the country's national interests on the issue of West Irian. The pressing need to mobilize supports from Asian-African countries in the voting process at the UN General Assembly as regard to the Question of West Irian was partly the reason why Indonesia went all out to organize not Asian-European or even Asian-American conferences but a conference specifically for Asian-African nations.

In this, one could understand as well why Bandung Conference could be regarded as diplomatic victory for Indonesia as far as the

West Irian diplomacy was concerned. The Final Communiqué of the conference included the statement of support from participating countries for Indonesia's position on the issue. The conference even clearly took side with Indonesia by urging "the Netherlands Government to reopen negotiation as soon as possible". Moreover, it also endorsed Indonesia's view that it was necessary for the UN to intervene in this matter by stating: "[The Conference] expressed the earnest hope that the United Nations would assist the parties concerned in finding a peaceful solution to the dispute." These statements indeed raised the Indonesians' confidence that the Asian-African countries would stand behind Indonesia during the debates on the Question of West Irian at the UN. As Indonesia's then foreign minister, Anak Agung Gde Agung described,

In April 1955 the Bandung Conference of Asian and African nations had adopted a resolution supporting Indonesia's national claim, making it apparent the Asian and African nations (with the probable exceptions of Turkey) would endorse a resolution at the General Assembly favoring Indonesia's position.<sup>31</sup>

In line with the Indonesians' expectation, the Asia-Africa Conference was proved to have positive impacts on Indonesia's West Irian diplomacy at the UN. At the ninth session of the General Assembly in 1954, Indonesia submitted on its own a draft resolution on the issue. In its first endeavor to turn the issue over to the UN, as described in the previous section, Indonesia even had to accept the fact that its proposed draft failed to attract complete support from the Asian-African states. In its subsequent endeavors from 1955 to 1957, nevertheless, Indonesia always had the supports of the Colombo powers and many other Asian-African

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<sup>31</sup> Agung, Ida Anak Agung Gde. *Twenty years Indonesian foreign policy 1945-1965* (pp. 110). The Hague: Mouton, 1973.

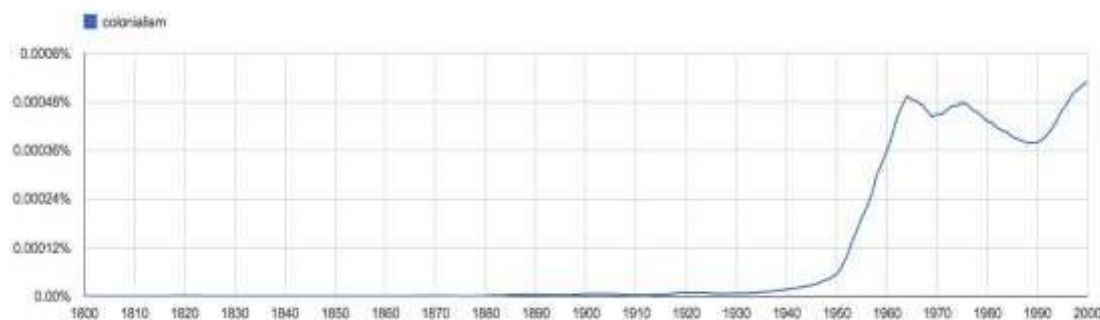
processes since the very beginning of the process to make the issue discussed at the General Assembly. They jointly submitted draft resolutions that were consistently in favor of Indonesia's position on the issue and further required the UN involvement in the dispute settlement between the Indonesians and the Dutch.

Such an action eventually accentuated the international nature of the issue; it was not only Indonesia and the Netherlands that had concern over the issue but many other countries. In this context, one could understand the strategic value of Asian-African solidarity that Indonesia sought to promote. It helped the Indonesian government to present the issue of West Irian as the one that already created international concern, the one that the world had to pay attention to. As such, the UN involvement was then perceived as highly necessary.

Indonesia's active promotion of Asia-Africa solidarity through a foreign policy

discourse in which colonialism was put as master signifier was carried out in parallel with a continued increase in the use of that word in literatures published in the 1950s to early 1960s. The Bandung Conference, in which the foreign policy discourse was firstly introduced internationally by Sukarno, was held following the discussion on colonialism within international literature that had experienced a sharp increase (Figure 1). The figure below also shows that the culminating point of the use of the word colonialism intersected with the moment when West Irian diplomacy concluded in the early 1960s. It is not the intention of this paper to claim that the substantial expansion in the discussion about colonialism was the function of Indonesia's foreign policy activism in promoting Asian-African solidarity. The figure, nevertheless, shows that Indonesia's foreign policy discourse was promoted when the issue of colonialism was drawing significant international attention.

**Figure 1. The use of the word colonialism in various literatures (1800 – 2000)**



Data were processed using Google Ngram Viewer, <http://books.google.com/ngrams>

Sukarno's Indonesia attempted to exploit this situation in which the issue of colonialism came under the international spotlight. This was particularly true after Indonesia experienced a series of setbacks during the voting at the eleventh and twelfth sessions of the General Assembly. The much-vaunted Asian-African solidarity indeed provided a positive contribution to Indonesia's diplomacy; still, it was not enough to meet the required two-third majority votes. It was clear

to Sukarno that Indonesia needed an additional approach to serve its national interests as regard to the issue of West Papua.

He promoted an alternative discourse of inter-state relations without altering the position of colonialism as the master signifier. In his speeches in New York and Belgrade, Sukarno said that international relations must not be focused on the Cold War; rather, it must be focused on the issue of colonialism, instead. He further portrayed colonialism as a threat to

world peace. In this discourse, the issue of West Irian was represented as something bigger than a mere territorial dispute; it was characterized as a clear example of how the world was not completely free of the practices of colonialism. In so doing, Sukarno purposely endeavored to portray the issue of West Irian as a world problem, thereby attracting wider international support for Indonesia's position on the issue.

In the context of the Cold War, it can be said that the efforts to internationalize the issue of West Irian were made to also attract the involvement of the two superpowers in the dispute settlement. Seeking to gain more influence in struggle between the Western and the Eastern Blocs, the Soviet Union made calculated maneuver to take advantage of the situation. This was especially true after Sukarno had displayed a more militant attitude on the issue of West Irian. The superpower and other eastern bloc countries provided quite a significant arms support for Indonesia. This brought about an impression that Indonesia was part of the communist bloc, although the country clearly never formally joined the bloc.

From the perspective of the geopolitical calculation during the Cold War, the US could not afford having a big military power like Indonesia to have the tendency to lean towards the communist bloc. For the Americans, the likelihood of an armed conflict between the Indonesians and the Dutch should be minimized since they were heavily preoccupied at that time with the Vietnam War. After observing Sukarno's militant statements in the Belgrade Conference, the White House was reportedly alarmed on the potential threat Indonesia might pose to the stability in Southeast Asia.<sup>32</sup> In his letter to President Kennedy, McGeorge Bundy, the US President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, also said that the US stance that did not support Indonesia's position on West Irian's issue would only make the

situation more favorable for the Communists.<sup>33</sup> It can thus be seen that all these factors managed to draw the American significant involvement in efforts to settle the issue of West Irian.<sup>34</sup>

The alternative discourse promoted by the Indonesians as they further internationalized the issue of West Irian seemingly provided positive contribution to Indonesia's diplomacy in dealing with the issue. It played an important role in drawing the attention of the two superpowers. By not declaring itself in favor of one particular bloc, Indonesia even managed to gain supports from both blocs. The Soviet Union provided arm supports, while diplomatic support, which in turn made Indonesia succeed in claiming West Irian to the Republic, came from the US.

## Conclusion

The emergence of Sukarno's Indonesia as one of the important players in international relations cannot be separated from the implementation of Indonesia's foreign policy to bring West Irian into the territory under the authority of the Republic. At the ideational level, Indonesia came up with a coherent and consistent foreign policy discourse, one which put colonialism as the master signifier. At the level of praxis, a discourse like this was translated into a foreign policy with a strong anti-colonialism nuance. This study has presented how the dynamics within these two realms were related to each other. It can thus be concluded that the foreign policy discourse firstly introduced at the Bandung Conference was aimed at serving Indonesia's national interests as regard to the issue of West Irian.

The promotion of Asian-African solidarity and the anti-colonialism sentiment

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<sup>32</sup> Bunnell, F. P. *American reactions to Indonesia's role in the Belgrade conference.*

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<sup>33</sup> Doran, Stuart. *Western friends and Eastern neighbors: West New Guinea and Australian self-perception in relation to the United States, Britain and Southeast Asia, 1950-1962.* PhD Diss., Australian National University, 1999.

<sup>34</sup> Anwar, D. F. *The Cold War and Its Impact on Indonesia: Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy.* In Lau, Albert (Ed.). *Southeast Asia and The Cold War.* New York: Routledge, 2012.

through the discourse must be understood as a means to mobilize supports from those countries so that Indonesia could gain a more favorable outcome in its efforts to turn the issue of the West Irian over to the UN. The foreign policy discourse was then further expanded to present an alternative reality of international relations at that time, in which the practice of colonialism, rather than the nuclear arms race between the superpowers, was represented as posing serious threats to international stability. A discourse like this was instrumental in drawing the involvement both the Soviet Union and the US in the dispute settlement process, as Indonesia further internationalized the issue of West Irian. As a result, the national interest to bring West Irian back into the fold of the Republic was well served, and moreover, Indonesia succeeded in enhancing its image, role, and leadership in world affairs.

In the contemporary context of international politics, Indonesia is again re-emerging as a player of considerable importance.<sup>35</sup> Its active contribution at regional and global level has been widely acknowledged. The country is a member of the G-20 and it continues to maintain its leadership roles in ASEAN. Additionally, Indonesia is also the initiator of the Bali Democracy Forum and it took an active part in creating the 2015 ASEAN Community. Under the leadership of President Joko Widodo, the country has been selected for the fourth time as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Demonstrating further its foreign policy activism, the country has made a great deal of effort in developing the Indo-Pacific concept

that has later been adopted as the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific.<sup>36</sup>

Sukarno's Indonesia showed an example how national interests should rather be the starting point of any foreign policy activism. With the coherent and consistent foreign policy discourse, Sukarno was able to exploit the emergence of Indonesia as an important international actor at that time to serve Indonesia's national interests. Indeed, it is a challenge for the current policy makers to bring forth a configuration of excellent and strong ideas and concepts, thereby enabling the country's foreign policy to serve the national interests and provide positive contribution to the nation's wellbeing in the future. As such, the current policymakers must emphasize that implementation of Indonesia's foreign policy and all its related activities and all the accompanying concepts are there to serve the national interests.

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<sup>35</sup> See Laksmana, E. A. Indonesia's rising regional and global profile: does size really matter? *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 23(2), 2011, 157–182, 2011 and Reid, Anthony (Ed.). *Indonesia rising: The repositioning of Asia's third giant*. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Anwar, D. F. Indonesia and the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific. *International Affairs*, 96(1), 111–129, 2020.



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