

# Indonesia's Diplomacy for Papua Issue in the Melanesian Spearhead Group: Challenges Remain

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## Abstrak

Dukungan dari sejumlah negara di Pasifik Selatan terhadap kelompok-kelompok yang menyerukan kemerdekaan Papua dari Indonesia telah cukup lama mengganggu pemerintah Indonesia. Berbagai langkah kebijakan merespon dukungan tersebut telah dilakukan pemerintah Indonesia, termasuk keputusan untuk berpartisipasi sebagai anggota di dalam organisasi regional beranggotakan negara-negara rumpun Melanesia, Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). Artikel ini menganalisis sejauhmana MSG strategis bagi Indonesia terutama dalam konteks isu separatisme Papua, serta sejauhmana diplomasi Indonesia terkait isu Papua melalui MSG telah memberikan kontribusi terhadap tujuan utamanya. Menggunakan secara simultan pendekatan antar-pemerintah dan realisme strategis, penulis melalui artikel ini berargumen bahwa meskipun MSG mempunyai posisi strategis yang menyebabkan pemerintah Indonesia mengeksploitasi persamaan dan perbedaan dengan kelompok negara-negara Melanesia, diplomasi Jakarta melalui MSG masih terus menghadapi sejumlah tantangan di masa depan.

Kata Kunci: Diplomasi Indonesia, Indonesia, Melanesian Spearhead Group, Separatisme Papua

## Abstract

Support from a number of South Pacific countries to groups that voice out the Papuan secession from Indonesia has long been disrupting the Indonesian government. Various policy measures aimed at responding to these continue to be taken, including through Indonesia's participation as a member of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). This article analyzes the extent to which MSG is basically strategic for Indonesia, especially within the context of the Papuan secession issue, and how far Indonesia's diplomacy through MSG has contributed to its main objective. Simultaneously utilizing an inter-governmental approach and strategic realism as a framework for analysis, it is argued here that while MSG has a politically strategic position prompting the Indonesian government to exploit similarities and differences with the Melanesian group of states, Jakarta's diplomacy through MSG continues to face challenges in the future.

Keywords: Indonesian Diplomacy, Indonesia, Melanesian Spearhead Group, Papua Secession

## INTRODUCTION

The 20th Summit of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) was held in Honiara, Solomon Islands, from June 24 to 26, 2015. During this summit, Indonesia's membership status within the MSG was upgraded from an observer, which it had obtained at the 18th MSG Summit in Fiji in 2011, to an associate. At the same time, the MSG also conferred observer status to the United Liberation Movement for West Papua/ULMWP (Firdaus, 2015). The ULMWP is a coalition formed in

political movements advocating for independence in Papua: The Federal Republic of West Papua (NRFPB), National Coalition for Liberation (WPNCL), and West Papua National Parliament (PNWP) (Ulmwp.org, 2014). The MSG is a sub-regional organization consisting of Papua New Guinea (PNG), Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, and New Caledonia's representative of the independence movement called Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS). The primary goal of the MSG is to promote the culture, values, and

economies of its member countries while also working towards a vision of decolonization and freedom for all Melanesian states through the development of interconnected identity and the enhancement of cultural, political, social, and economic dimensions within Melanesian society (May, 2011).

The rise of Indonesian status was met with a variety of reactions. Some interpreted it as a diplomatic success, asserting that it would improve Jakarta's position in relation to the Papuan secession. Meanwhile, others believed that as a new member, Jakarta would benefit as it could increase cooperation with the MSG member countries, thereby limiting the opportunities among the various international organizations advocating for Papuan independence, especially those from within the MSG (Andhika, 2015). Conversely, some perceive Indonesia's elevation as a setback, contending that the ULMWP's observer status signified a formal acknowledgment of the ULMWP's existence. Amiruddin Al-Alrahhab, an activist with the Papua Resource Center, expressed to *Sinar Harapan* (2015) that granting observer status to the ULMWP, a status previously held by Indonesia, suggested that the ULMWP is not only on par with Indonesia but can be seen as a form of recognition by the MSG. Thus, it was a defeat for Jakarta's diplomacy. In addition, some believe that the elevation is simply a 'noble cause' that presents Indonesia as a neighbor and brother who shares similar expectations and aspirations with residents in the MSG member countries. The new higher membership status integrates Indonesia into the Melanesian family, as provinces in eastern Indonesia [now two provinces in Maluku, six in Papua, and East Nusa Tenggara are predominantly inhabited by ethnic Melanesians (Carnadi, 2015).

There is a lack of sufficient research supporting the aforementioned perspectives, but the few available are worth taking into account. Indonesia's increased involvement in the MSG has led to Jakarta being viewed as part of 'Pacifonesia,' given the fact that many provinces named above in eastern Indonesia are home to ethnic Melanesians. One study suggests that Indonesia has taken various steps to ensure that the ULMWP's intention to join MSG as a member is rejected (Elmslie &

Webb-Gannon, 2014). Another study (Elmslie, 2015) indicates that Indonesia's diplomatic maneuvers within the MSG have presented a number of challenges and opportunities for the Melanesian member states. Jakarta's presence within the MSG has stabilized the trading language, thereby eliminating ethnic sentiments that could lead to conflicts of interest between the pro-Indonesian policies of MSG member countries and the Melanesian ethnic sentiment in favor of Papuan secession. Furthermore, Indonesia's increased involvement in the MSG also brings several opportunities, such as providing development assistance, as most MSG members are economically in need of development aid flows. Elmslie (2015) reveals that the presence of Indonesian aid can strengthen the bargaining position of MSG member countries vis-à-vis traditional aid providers in MSG countries, such as Australia and New Zealand. Another study suggests that Indonesia's participation in the MSG is driven by the logic of *realpolitik*, securing national interests, which has been able to sideline the logic of solidarity that has been the core of MSG since its inception (Lawson, 2016a). This is evident in the withdrawal of official support from two members of the MSG, Fiji and Papua New Guinea, over the Papuan separatism issue, signifying that both accommodate Jakarta's stance on the issue.

Since joining as an associate member of MSG, the relationship between Indonesia and the MSG has displayed a favorable upward trajectory. This was evident during the Budget Meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers convened in Port Vila, Vanuatu, on March 27, 2024. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Pahala Mansury, acknowledged the pivotal role played by MSG in addressing various global issues and serving as a sub-regional platform that champions shared interests among developing nations. Furthermore, Indonesia commends MSG members who advocate for concerns related to development rights, climate change, energy transition, and sustainable development. As such, Indonesia is dedicated to enhancing collaboration and addressing mutual challenges encountered by MSG countries in the region, including issues with connectivity, susceptibility to natural disasters, and

sustainable resource management. Indonesia's dedication is exemplified through the "Development Cooperation Roadmap," which emphasizes key areas such as agriculture, fisheries, infrastructure development, and education (Afifa, 2024).

The following important questions were borne out of the aforementioned responses and previous studies. How strategic is the position of MSG in Indonesia's eyes in relation to Jakarta's attempt to block international support for Papuan secession? How far has Indonesia's diplomacy through MSG contributed to its main objective? Using a combination of inter-governmental approach and strategic realism as an analytical framework, arguably, while MSG has a politically strategic position prompting the Indonesian government to exploit similarities and differences with the Melanesian group of states, Jakarta's diplomacy through MSG in regard to the Papua issue likely continues to face challenges in the future.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Numerous potential factors can lead a state to pursue its national interests through international organizations (Axelrod, 1984; Axelrod & Keohane, 1985). Two primary reasons are commonly observed (Abbot, 2015; Karnst & Mingst, 2004). Firstly, international organizations offer a solid and consistent organizational framework along with administrative structures that are capable of managing the collective activities of the organization's members. Secondly, international organizations possess the capacity and mandate to operate with a certain level of authority within the agreed-upon sphere of influence by its members. Consequently, international organizations can fulfill various functions to promote the shared interests of their members, which is why many nations opt to participate in such organizations (Lipson, 1984).

The above-mentioned reason is supported by neo-liberal advocates who emphasize the role of international institutions in facilitating cooperation between states, ultimately leading to stability, peace, and the advancement of national interests. Proponents of neo-liberalism view institutions as essential mediators

and tools for promoting collaboration among different agencies within the international system (Lamy, 2001). Furthermore, while neo-liberalism recognizes the anarchic structure of the international system and sees the state as a rational actor, it however still holds interstate cooperation in the anarchist international system situation in high esteem. Therefore, it is clear that the main principle promoting neo-liberalism is the optimism for cooperation under the anarchy system.

The role of international institutions within any international cooperation has been one of the main focuses of the neo-liberalism argument, which is also the starting point of its prescriptions for international stability and peace. To work together, Keohane (1982; 1984) emphasizes the importance of states being able to address a number of common problems, which are generally rooted in transactional cost calculations; states need to coordinate actions for smooth cooperation to exist. It is within this context that the presence of international institutions is important in managing collective actions (Keohane & Nye, 1977). According to Mingst (2003), states cooperate for various reasons, including addressing the mutual needs of members. For one thing, international organizations provide a forum where countries together can relieve potential threats to their cooperation. Considering the aforementioned framework, Indonesia's membership in the MSG is a concrete manifestation of Jakarta's need for the presence of these international organizations as a medium for pursuing the nation's interests.

However, in today's world, the state occasionally goes beyond being a 'neutral' member of an international organization for various reasons. This prompts the authors of this article to borrow the basic logic of global strategy introduced by Pankaj Ghemawat, rejecting overstated arguments of globalization and insisting that what actually happens at this time is somewhat a 'semi-globalization' agenda, where the world is still far from 'global unification' as implied by the words like 'flat-world' and 'global village'; there are still differences in the global life (Ghemawat, 2007). Following Ghemawat, the main strategy for survival in dealing with these differences rests on the state's capacity to manage

the differences by means of adaptation, aggregation, and arbitration, or what is known as the “Tripple A Strategy.” Success or survival is realized when each A can be played skillfully; A1 adapts to differences, A2 overcomes differences, and A3 exploits differences. Therefore, value creation from success is achieved when each element of A can be combined skillfully (Ghemawat, 2007). The authors thereby refer to and name Ghemawat’s global strategic propositions as ‘strategic realism,’ which is part of the analytical tool employed in this article.

Strategic realism is highly important for analyzing state behavior in this contemporary world, which has been completely marked by various elements of differences. Furthermore, power is no longer solely measured by traditional indicators as non-tangible elements in national power are increasingly complex (Keane, 2003), not to mention when corporate forces and other international capitalist class actors are taken into account (Bairadavolu, 2008; Carroll, 2010). The structure of the current global world is more of a result of the interaction between the various actors of global power known as ‘cosmocracy’, a form of global political community characterized by “a complex mixture of linked networks, governmental, law enforcement and military interdependence worldwide” (Keane, 2002).

Combining these two approaches - inter-governmental and strategic realism - this article argues that Indonesia’s membership in the MSG not only can be seen as a concrete manifestation whereby it needs the presence of international organizations as a medium for pursuing interests but more than that, Indonesia uses the mechanism offered by MSG as a medium where it can employ a combine strategic tools in fulfilling Indonesia’s national interests, which include blocking international support for Papuan secession movements stemming from and channeling through the members of MSG. Elements of similarities and differences in the fields of politics, economy, and culture between Indonesia and member countries of MSG are thereby exploited to meet Indonesia’s objectives.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The study utilized qualitative methodologies, with a focus on the MSG as the primary subject of analysis. The objective is to gain a comprehensive insight into the specific context of the case (Tomaszewski, Zarestky & Gonzales, 2020). Qualitative research methods are designed to capture the complex nature of social phenomena, which emphasizes an understanding of the social world. Using the materials available in books, journals, and the Internet allowed the authors to locate materials across various databases used to find, gather, and analyze information (Maxwell & Reybold, 2015). This study made use of secondary sources to gather pertinent materials, including those found in textbooks, journal articles, reviews, and other online sources. The data analysis involved multiple processes, such as verification, organization, and customization of the available data in order to uncover valuable and relevant information. This research’s data analysis process commenced by establishing the objectives and crafting precise questions that the author aims to address. Subsequently, the process involved gathering and organizing data, which can then be utilized for the analysis and interpretation of facts and, ultimately, for effective communication of the results.

## RESULT AND ANALYSIS

### INDONESIA’S ATTENDANCE IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Since the 1970s, Indonesia has recognized the South Pacific as a crucial area for political, defense, and security purposes. Jakarta views peace and stability in the South Pacific as essential for Indonesia’s economic development. The view was officially adopted in the People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR) Decrees No. IV in 1973, 1978, and 1983 regarding the Guidelines of State Policy (GBHN). It was consistently emphasized in the documents that despite being situated in Southeast Asia, Indonesia must take tangible measures to enhance the stability of the South Pacific region, as the region’s stability significantly contributed to Indonesia’s resilience efforts (Usman, 1994). Therefore, the South Pacific region represents the second layer after Southeast

Asia in Jakarta's foreign policy formulation and implementation, where Jakarta consistently impacted other ASEAN members by expressing its perspective that the South Pacific holds significant importance (Dugis, Wardhani, & Susilo, 2001). During the 1978 ASEAN Summit in Manila, a declaration was made emphasizing ASEAN's pledge to enhance collaboration with all South Pacific states, irrespective of their developmental status (Hadipranowo, 1991).

Indonesia's involvement in the South Pacific became noticeable during the 1980s. In 1983, Indonesia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, embarked on an extensive tour of Fiji, PNG, Western Samoa, and the Solomon Islands (Usman, 1994, p. 196). The extensive visit undoubtedly marked the start of Indonesia's more concrete involvement with the region. Economic collaboration saw a rise following the visit, leading to the official establishment of diplomatic ties with Western Samoa a year later (Dugis, Wardhani, & Susilo, 2001: 20).

It is important to highlight that Indonesia's shift towards focusing on the South Pacific during the 1980s was a strategic response to political developments. Specifically, this was a period when Jakarta faced increasing challenges from rebel groups in Papua, then referred to as Irian Jaya, which were associated with the Organization for Papuan Independence (Premdas, 1985). The increasing pressure escalated when Indonesia's human rights record came under severe criticism for its aggressive and militaristic tactics in addressing the Papua secession problem (Budiarjo & Liong, 1988). Additionally, the initial portion of the decade saw Indonesia facing frequent scrutiny regarding its decision to incorporate East Timor. This action was widely viewed as an annexation on the global stage (Kamm, 1981). During the 1980s, the Organization for Papua Independence started reaching out to other countries in the South Pacific for support, leveraging the Melanesian sentiment as a key factor. Vanuatu emerged as the first nation to openly express sympathy towards the cause. In early March 1981, reports indicated that PNG Foreign Minister Noel Levi issued a protest note to Vanuatu concerning the Vanuatu Party's backing of Rex

Rumakiek's office in Port Villa, which was coordinating the Papua independence movement.

In the late 1990s, Indonesia experienced significant political transformations, resulting in an increased political influence with the countries in the South Pacific. In December 2000, at the invitation of PNG's Prime Minister, Vice President Megawati Soekarnoputri visited Port Moresby to commemorate 25 years of PNG's independence. Vice President Megawati had the privilege of unveiling a statue of late President Sukarno (Megawati's father) in the capital city of Port Moresby. The Chairman of the National Celebration Council of PNG, Peter Barter, remarked that this was a momentous occasion for PNG because both governments held meetings to address border and security concerns, as well as matters pertaining to bilateral trade (Radio Australia, 2000). Following the visit, an MoU was swiftly signed between both sides on matters related to trade and industry. At the same time, PNG expressed full support for Indonesia's territorial integrity (Kompas, 2000).

A milestone result was gained by Jakarta in 2001 when Indonesia was formally acknowledged as a Dialogue Partner of the PIF (Pacific Island Forum). The decision was a response to Indonesia's request made in October 2000 during the 31st PIF Summit in Tawara. Indonesia's admission to the PIF holds significant political importance, particularly in relation to the Papua issue. Indonesia's active involvement also presented a chance for the Indonesian government to offer impartial details regarding the efforts made to tackle the problem of Papuan separatism. Encouraging outcomes emerged soon after, as during the conclusion of the 2001 PIF Summit, member states unanimously acknowledged in the official statement that Indonesia held sovereignty over Papua, which was explicitly recognized as an Indonesian province (Forum Secretariat, 2001). It was further recognized during the forum that the special autonomy policy for Papua was seen as the key solution to tackling various violent issues in Papua, and the PIF countries did not officially express any backing for the separatism issue in Papua (Kompas, 2001a). Indonesia has shown appreciation for the assistance by suggesting strengthening diplomatic relationships with various

nations in the South Pacific, starting with the initiation of straight diplomatic connections with Fiji, where the PIF's Secretariat is located (Kompas, 2001b).

The information provided above clearly demonstrates the significance that Indonesia places on the South Pacific region, where the countries in the region have the potential to pose a threat to Indonesia's stance on the matter for three main reasons. The significance of the South Pacific region for Indonesia in relation to the issue of Papua secession was openly acknowledged when President Yudhoyono became the first Indonesian president to visit the region in 2014. During his visit, President Yudhoyono engaged in bilateral talks with the Fijian government and was invited as the Chief Guest at the 2nd PIDF Summit hosted by Fiji. At the summit, Yudhoyono emphasized the importance of establishing good relations and directly stating Indonesia's policy on Papua to the countries in the region in order to address the misinformation surrounding the issue (Baho, 2014). Overall, Indonesia has established robust alliances with important nations in the region, leading to their formal recognition of Indonesia's sovereignty, a crucial factor in the region's geopolitical landscape (Asril, 2014).

## THE EMERGING MSG AND INDONESIA'S RESPONSE

Initially established in 1983 as a political entity within the South Pacific Forum (SPF), MSG transitioned into a formal institution in 2007 (Lawson, 2016b). In the South Pacific, the MSG is recognized as the predominant political-economic alliance, encompassing four member states - PNG, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Fiji. Together, they contribute to three-quarters of the total population, land area, and GDP among all nations in the area (Pacific Institute of Public Policy, 2008). Initially, the motivation behind its formation was to unite Melanesian support for the struggle for FNLKS independence, as it was perceived that former colonial countries like Australia and New Zealand were no longer fully supportive in forums involving South Pacific countries.

The MSG's collaboration broadened to encompass economic progress as well. The 1996 signing of the updated Principles of Cooperation in Kiriwina, PNG,

emphasized the importance of fostering economic partnerships. Despite this focus on economic cooperation, the MSG has not forsaken its initial goal of advocating for the political rights of Melanesian community groups (May, 2011). Free trade agreements among MSG member countries were further enhanced, leading to increased trade cooperation, which prompted MSG members to ratify a 'constitution' regulating their organizational structures in 2007 with the signing of the agreement establishing the MSG, thereby formalizing the group's status under international law (Wardhani, 2015). The MSG Permanent Secretariat was officially opened in Port Vila, Vanuatu, a year later (Pacific Institute of Public Policy, 2008). The creation of the secretariat not only demonstrates the organization's commitment to professionalism but also underscores the opportunity for enhanced collaboration as an international body. The revised 2007 agreement clearly outlines the promotion and strengthening of trade among member states, the exchange of Melanesian cultures, traditions, and values, as well as the emphasis on equal sovereignty, economic and technical cooperation, and policy alignment to achieve common goals of economic growth, sustainable development, good governance, and security within MSG nations. Ever since the inception of the MSG Permanent Secretariat, economic collaboration has been the focal point, with member states taking the lead in enhancing economic cooperation. The agreement was reaffirmed in 2005 and revised in 2009, primarily aimed at creating avenues for the free trade of member countries' goods (May, 2011).

Since its inception, the Indonesian government has been well aware of the potential for MSG to serve as a platform advocating for the secession of Papua. The Melanesian ethnic foundation of MSG resonates strongly with the people of Papua. At the same time, the presence of the New Caledonian political party FNLKS within MSG further solidifies its role as a forum for independence struggles. Prior to its establishment, several members of MSG had already expressed support for Papuan secession, including leaders from Vanuatu, Nauru, and Tuvalu at the September 2000 UN Millennium Summit in New York. As a result, the issue

of Papuan secession has found a new voice through MSG. Given the cultural ties between Melanesian groups and the Papuan independence movement, those advocating for Papuan secession within MSG continue to push for it to be a central agenda. This dynamic has positioned MSG as a significant entity in the eyes of the Indonesian government.

In responding to the rise of MSG, the Indonesian government employed two simultaneous strategies. Initially, by emphasizing the element of similarity, several provinces in eastern Indonesia are predominantly inhabited by Melanesian ethnic groups, prompting Jakarta to actively pursue membership status within the MSG. Indonesia has been a consistent Post Forum Regular Partner since 1989 (Lawson, 2016b) and intentionally sent pro-Indonesian Papuans to participate in various MSG meetings (Carter & Firth, 2015). Furthermore, Jakarta promptly employs development assistance as a diplomatic tool to engage with fellow member states. The initial approach of emphasizing commonalities proved to be effective during the 18th MSG Summit in Suva, Fiji, in 2011, leading to Indonesia and Timor Leste being granted observer status, making both the first to receive such recognition (Press Release 18th MSG Leaders Summit, 2011).

After achieving this new status, the Indonesian government increased its diplomatic efforts. Jakarta has used its membership status to oppose potential MSG support for Papuan secessionist movements. For example, when the WPNCL requested participation in MSG during the leaders' summit in New Caledonia in 2013, Indonesia replied by inviting delegations of MSG Foreign Ministers to visit Papua, observing the situation firsthand. As a result, the WPNCL application was placed on hold until after the visit to Papua (MSG Leaders Summit Communique, 2013). Vanuatu reportedly planned to attend in January 2014, but at the last minute, they withdrew. From January 12 to 15, the foreign ministers of the Solomon Islands, Fiji, and PNG, as well as the FLNKS representative and the high representative of the MSG, visited Jakarta, Jayapura, Papua, and Ambon, Maluku, to meet with various dignitaries and personalities in Indonesia. After the visit,

the foreign ministers of the MSG and Indonesia came to an understanding about the need to create a roadmap to improve relations between the two countries, with an emphasis on upholding one another's sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, and non-interference in domestic matters (Suryopranoto, 2014). Following their visit to Papua, the MSG delegation convened with President Yudhoyono in Jakarta. A press release issued by the Fijian government, which headed the MSG delegation, emphasized the delegation's utmost respect for Indonesia's sovereignty and territorial integrity while also acknowledging West Papua as an inseparable part of Indonesia (Saragih & Aritonang, 2014).

Indonesia's maneuver in the MSG prompted major factions of political movements seeking independence for Papua (the Federal Republic of West Papua/NRFPB, the National Coalition for Liberation/WPNCL, the West Papua National Parliament/PNWP) to form a joint movement known as the United Liberation Movement for West Papua/ULMWP in 2014, and immediately applied for membership status of the MSG. Indonesia quickly responded by intensifying diplomatic contacts with other MSG members, making sure the application was to be rejected. It turned out that Indonesia was successful when the leaders of MSG decided to delay the decision. The response strategy employed by Jakarta became stronger when President Yudhoyono visited Fiji in 2014. Giving a speech shortly before flying to Fiji, he insisted that the South Pacific Forum and the MSG organization had frequently served as a space for political campaigns by those seeking Papua's liberation and that their forums were being used as campaign platforms on the issue of Papua secession. Therefore, overcoming the situation by means of establishing strong and good relationships is necessary (Waluyo, 2014).

Following Indonesia's attainment of observer status in 2011, the second strategy of leveraging disparities was promptly reinforced. This was achieved through the provision of aid and economic assistance as a means of diplomacy. Indonesia conducted 130 technical assistance programs, which were attended by around 500 individuals from MSG member countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Indonesia, 2015).

Additionally, Jakarta served as a crucial link between MSG and the broader Asian region in terms of economics, which is beneficial for MSG nations as they can access the rapidly expanding Asian economy through the mechanism provided via APEC (the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation), TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership), RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership), and AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) (Pramono, 2016).

However, different reactions were displayed by MSG member countries in response to Indonesia's membership. Vanuatu stands out as the most outspoken supporter of West Papuan independence within the MSG. In contrast, Papua New Guinea and Fiji tend to exhibit a more cautious approach to supporting Indonesia (Hayward-Jones, 2009). These variations can be attributed to a range of factors, including economic, political, and strategic considerations unique to each member state. The internal disagreements within the MSG regarding West Papua highlight a larger obstacle to regional cohesion when addressing delicate matters.

The Indonesian 'strategic realism' approach of combining two strategies of exploiting similarities and differences simultaneously got to another level of success during the 20th Summit of MSG in Honiara, Salomon Islands; Indonesia's membership status within the MSG was elevated from an observer to an associate. Speaking at the summit, Indonesia's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, AM Fachir, stressed the political significance of the South Pacific to Indonesia, arguing that the region was one of Indonesia's top priorities, proven by Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi's decision to visit PNG, the Salomon Islands, and Fiji on her first official visit as a Foreign Minister, and in addition by the fact that President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo had visited PNG a few months prior to Minister Marsudi's visit (Fachir, 2015).

The intensity of Indonesia's involvement, as well as its new associate status, continues under President Jokowi. In late February 2015, the newly appointed Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi, made a marathon visit to three MSG members: PNG, Salomon Island, and Fiji. In fact, this was Minister Marsudi's first official visit since her appointment in

October 2014. After the meeting with her counterpart of Solomon Island, Minister Milner Tozaka, both stated that Indonesia and Solomon Islands have Melanesian cultural heritage, which can be used as a basis for building a closer and more meaningful bilateral relationship (Nasution, 2016). Then, in May 2015, President Jokowi visited PNG and stated that his visit was to reaffirm Indonesia's commitment to increasing the future relationship between Indonesia and PNG. As an important neighbor, Jokowi expected PNG to help Indonesia in building constructive relationships with the Melanesian countries in the region.

A month after President Jokowi's visit, an audit mission team was deployed to PNG and the Solomon Islands, delivering capacity-building support to both countries. The team brought along a craft machine and professionals to promote economic empowerment projects for environmentally focused Small and Medium Enterprises (KBRI Port Moresby, 2015). The collaboration further continued when Jakarta organized the inaugural Melanesian Cultural Festival in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, from October 27 - 30, 2015, with representatives from Fiji, New Caledonia, Solomon Islands, PNG, Vanuatu, and Timor Leste (Fardah, 2015; Putri, 2015). This event was particularly significant as it demonstrated Indonesia's commitment to the welfare of the Melanesian people. To improve bilateral ties, a delegation headed by Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs, traveled to Fiji and Papua New Guinea in 2016, where Indonesia offered US\$3 million in goods to help Fijian victims of the Tropical Cyclone, as well as US\$3 million in financial aid to support agricultural development through the delivery of 100 hand tractors. As a result, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, the foreign minister of Fiji, suggested elevating Indonesia's status in the MSG from associate membership to a full member. Equally, Prime Minister Peter O'Neill of PNG invited President Joko Widodo to Port Moresby in May 2016, during which the two leaders decided to raise the annual value of bilateral trade to US\$4.5 million (Fardah, 2016). Overall, the growing involvement of Indonesia in MSG has prevented ULMWP from gaining any ground. In 2016,



Indonesia effectively blocked ULMWP's attempt to achieve a status higher than an observer (Dewi, 2016).

Papua's significance within the MSG poses challenges for Indonesia, as the issue of Papua remains contentious among member states. Indonesia must carefully navigate this issue within the MSG to ensure that the platform remains conducive to addressing its interests both regionally and globally. Despite Indonesia's efforts to improve the economic position and well-being of Papuans in order to combat separatist sentiments, the MSG continues to be strongly supportive of West Papuan independence movements. As an associate member, Indonesia is committed to engaging constructively with other member states to address concerns related to West Papua while upholding its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The appointment of special envoys by the MSG, including Fiji's Sitiveni Rabuka and Papua New Guinea's James Marape, to engage with Indonesia on the West Papua issue has been welcomed by the Pacific Conference of Churches (Anthony, 2023). It reflects the group's commitment to constructive dialogue and Indonesia's willingness to address the concerns through peaceful means.

Indonesia's strategy involves active diplomacy and dialogue, leveraging its associate member status to participate in discussions and influence the group's agenda. However, the challenge for Indonesia lies in reconciling the aspirations of the West Papuan independence movement with the strategic interests of MSG member states. Indonesia's participation as an associate member in the MSG is crucial for bridging the economic gap between Melanesia and the rapidly growing Asian market. The combined GDP of the MSG, amounting to approximately US\$23 billion, serves as the foundation for the group's engagement with ASEAN and the ASEAN Economic Community, which boasts a GDP of around \$2.3 trillion (Pramono, 2016).

Indonesia's foreign policy, especially in the context of the MSG, will face challenges in navigating domestic priorities (namely maintaining sovereignty and territorial integrity) with regional dynamics (ensuring the stability of relations with MSG countries in particular and the South Pacific in particular). Apart from that, Indonesia

also faces major challenges related to the development of various forms of non-traditional security, such as climate change, cross-border crime, health issues, human migration, and the like. These issues are also part of the MSG security strategy stated in the Boe Declaration (Naupa, Ackman, & Tuimalealiifano, 2018). The strategic priorities in the MSG Security Strategy are in line with Indonesia's long-term strategic interests, which emphasize regional stability and prosperity in its foreign policy.

## CONCLUSION

The elevation of Indonesia's MSG membership status in 2015 from previous observer to associate was a triumph for Jakarta's diplomacy, though, on the same occasion, ULMWP was granted an observer status. With the new membership, Indonesia has been able to play an effective strategy of exploiting similarities and differences. Claims of Melanesian cultural similarities have enabled Jakarta to expand and widen its engagement with MSG. Moreover, economic differences, where Indonesia is far more powerful in offering assistance and influence to MSG members, have made MSG members perceive that establishing closer relations with Indonesia potentially brings more payback than openly supporting the movements supporting Papuan secession on the basis of Melanesian solidarity. Through the mechanism of institutional cooperation at the international level (engagement in MSG), Indonesia can ensure that it maintains its national interests in relation to the issue of Papuan secession.

Indonesia's role in MSG is deeply rooted in its longstanding engagement in the South Pacific region. Throughout the years, Indonesia has maintained a presence in this area, dating back to the New Order era when it incorporated the region into its foreign policy framework, positioning it as a crucial element following ASEAN. This study elucidates the strategic importance of MSG for Indonesia in countering global backing for Papuan secessionist movements. Furthermore, it explores how Indonesia's enhanced stature within MSG can be perceived as either a triumph or a setback in its diplomatic battle against proponents of Papuan

independence. It is evident that MSG holds significant political value for Indonesia concerning the Papuan secession issue. Therefore, Indonesia's membership and efforts to bolster its role in MSG are fundamentally aimed at diminishing international backing for groups advocating for Papuan independence from the Republic of Indonesia.

Indonesia's approach to the Papua issue within the MSG involves diplomatic, economic, and socio-political strategies. Despite these efforts, the issue of West Papua remains a point of contention within the MSG, with some member states expressing support for West Papuan independence movements. Indonesia has been actively engaging with member countries to address concerns related to West Papua, particularly those pertaining to human rights and self-determination claims. By participating in the MSG, Indonesia aims to foster better relations with Melanesian countries and mitigate international support for the Free Papua Movement. Indeed, the situation remains fluid, with ongoing dialogues and diplomatic efforts shaping the future of Indonesia's engagement with the MSG and the West Papua issue. The MSG's role as a regional body and its decisions on matters such as ULMWP's membership will continue to influence the geopolitical landscape of the region.

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