

The Rise of China's Influence in Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG): Threat to Indonesia's Border Issues

Septyanto Galan Prakoso^{1,2}), Rameez Ali Surya Negara³), Rheyno Reynaldi³),
Damar Ahmad Priambodo³), & Niki Wahyu Sayekti³)

1) Institute of Political Science, National Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan

2) Lecturer in Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social Science and
Politics, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Indonesia

3) Almuni of Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social Science and Politics,
Universitas Sebelas Maret, Indonesia

Submitted: 27 June 2021; Reviewed: 27 June 2021; Accepted: 26 October 2021

*Corresponding Email: septyantogalan@gmail.com

Abstract

This article or writing aims to discuss the rising influence of China over the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) which could become a potential threat to Indonesia. It was worth to note that MSG has been involved directly to the effort for West Papua. Meanwhile, Indonesia and China relation has a strained relation in the South China Sea dispute. Hence, Indonesia is now facing two problems at once, one on the northern side of its border and the other one on the eastern side of its border. The problem is focused on how China can use the West Papua issue to pressure Indonesia regarding the South China Sea dispute by using their influence over the MSG countries. The analysis conducted in this research will analyze and explain the situation faced by the Indonesian government based on the facts. In order to approach this problem the theory of Hegemony is used. The data is collected through library research and analyzed qualitatively. This study concludes that due to China's rising influence on the MSG, China had the much-needed leverage on Indonesia in South China Sea dispute and Indonesia is at the disadvantaged position where it has to face two problems at once those are regarding West Papua and South China Sea.

Keywords: South China Sea; West Papua; Indonesia – China Relation; Diplomatic Maneuver.

How to Cite: Prakoso, S. G., Negara R.A.S., Reynaldi R., Priambodo D.A., & Sayekti N.W. (2022). The Rise of China's Influence in Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG): Threat to Indonesia's Border Issue. *Journal of Education, Humaniora and Social Sciences (JEHSS)*. 4(3): 1342 -1346



INTRODUCTION

China's influence over Pacific Island countries has been on the rise for decades. This rise of influence was marked by an announcement made by China's government stating that it will expand diplomatic ties with Pacific Island Countries in 2003. (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Papua New Guinea, n.d.) Following this statement, in 2006 China took further steps in the region by offering aid packages. (China Daily, n.d.) Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia are the members of Pacific Island and all of these regions are the target of China Foreign Policy to rise their power in international level. (Connolly, 2016) Recently, China aids and developmental supports are particularly strong in Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Vanuatu, and Solomon Island which are the four sovereign states members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). (Changsen, 2014)

In an article published by The Sydney Morning Herald in April 9th 2018, China is trying to build a permanent military base in Vanuatu. (Wroe, 2018) This shows how much strength Beijing's influence over the Pacific Islands countries. This plan followed after a major funding by the Chinese government in Vanuatu to build a new wharf on Espiritu Santo Island. This wharf is in proximity of an international airport that has been upgraded with Chinese aid as well.

Besides Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea (PNG) also has a good relationship with China in economic sector like investments and construction growth in there recently. (Connolly, 2016) China exports mining materials to the PNG. (Connolly, 2016) To grow their infrastructure sector they provide timber, nickel and *et cetera*, and to grow the economic sector, China provides natural gas which is use for transportation sector and also another sector. (Connolly, 2016) This shows how important aid from China to PNG. China and Fiji's relation is also beneficial. Since 1981 until 2013, China had sent big aids to Fiji. (Guixia, 2015) The aid is used to do bridge project, hospital project, hydro- electric project, road project, housing project, economic project, sea wall project, agriculture project, e-government project and *et cetera*. (Guixia, 2015) In 2009, China also provided 50 million US dollars to help develop factories and entertainment sector to increase their economic rate. (Guixia, 2015) In Solomon Islands, China's aid had made many impacts in the education system, investments activities, and *et cetera*. Recently, China had already started their project to build an airport in the Solomon Islands. (Beldi, n.d.)

There are some articles used as references in this research. But there are three main articles highlighted as important sources and references for this research. The first article is "Engaging China's new foreign policy in the South Pacific" by Peter Connolly, which explains China's new approach in dealing with South Pacific-related affairs in the form of new foreign policy. This article helps this research discover about China's move on the Southern hemisphere and its tactic on planting its influence over the said region which later becomes a benefit for China on its affair in the Asia Pacific region as discussed in this paper.

The second article was written by Yu Changsen titled "China's Economic Relations with Pacific Islands Countries", which gives description about the relations that the People's Republic of China has with some Pacific Islands Countries, or mainly, countries in Oceania region economically. This writing provides data for this research to further understand about China's economic ties with Oceania countries which made China's presence in said region become more prominent.

The third article used as a significant reference for this research is "China's development aid to Fiji: motive and method" by Lyu Guixia. This paper describes about China's aid program to Fiji, the way it was carried on and the motive/background behind this development aid program sponsored by China. Aid program is another common tactic used by big countries on indirectly planting influence on smaller countries and from this scheme, it can be seen that China is undeniably plotting the same thing. This paper provides additional data for this research especially regarding China's rising influence in the Pacific region.

Those three articles are regarded to be sufficient to become a foundation to analyse the rise of China's influence against the Pacific Islands, and how that can become a threat for Indonesia. Using all the resources and references acquired, this research aims to describe how China has



gradually grown into an influential player in the South Pacific region and how that rising influence of China in the Oceania could become a threat to Indonesia since Indonesia is still facing ongoing dispute with China in the South China Sea and another issue with Melanesian countries about West Papua.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research used the descriptive-qualitative method with a literature study as the main sources to make the analysis. The descriptive research method was chosen since this writing aims to describe a phenomenon that in this case is the rising influence of China over MSG countries which indirectly becomes a threat for Indonesia since Indonesia has a strained relation with China regarding South China Sea dispute and a quite complicated relation with the MSG countries over West Papua issue. Using said method, it is going to be described or elaborated in this paper, how the growing presence of China in the MSG countries (Indonesia's eastern borders) can put Indonesia in a difficult situation since Indonesia now has to deal with two problems on its border (northern and eastern) at once. Based on this predicament, China can "utilize" the West Papua issue, which also becomes a concern of MSG countries, to pressure Indonesia regarding the South China Sea dispute since China has its big influence and tangible power over MSG countries now. Using data collected through various physical and digital resources, this issue was later analyzed deeply with qualitative approach. Official statements/publication, credible news reports, and experts' opinion were gathered and extracted to support the analysis made in this paper. The acquired data were exploited to further examine and elaborate the discussed matter.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Recent Development on South China Sea Dispute between China and Indonesia

In recent years, tension between the two countries over the disputed region has been on the rise. Indonesia has taken and has been involved in a few drastic actions against China. Most notably in 2015, when Indonesia decided to blow up foreign illegal fishing boats and one of the destroyed ships is a Chinese ship. Beijing responded sternly over this issue and urged Jakarta to stop destroying illegal fishing boats. (Reuters, n.d.) This concern was ignored by Indonesia as it continued to destroy illegal fishing boats up until 2017. In addition to destroying boats, Indonesia has been involved in a couple of skirmishes against China inside its exclusive economic zone in proximity of Natuna Islands, an Indonesian region that overlaps with China's Nine-Dash claim over the South China Sea. (AseanToday, n.d.)

One of the most important events between the two countries is the announcement of a new map by the Indonesian government on July 14th, 2017. (Pratomo, 2017) This new map changed the name of Indonesian exclusive economic zone over the South China Sea to 'North Natuna Sea'. On the same day of the announcement, Indonesia began to build up military presence over the newly named region. (Cochrane, 2017) After this name change and an increase in military presence over the region, Beijing sent a demand to Indonesia urging them to stop using and reverse the name 'North Natuna Sea' for the sake of peace and stability. (The Jakarta Post, 2017) This demand got no reaction from Jakarta and the name is still used until today. This marked an important point in which Indonesia has officially challenged China's claim and has become a claimant on the dispute.

Historically, China and Indonesia's relation was pretty rough. The relation between the two countries after Indonesia's independence was first established in the 1950s. Ever since this establishment, the relation is bumpy because of domestic politics that happened in Indonesia especially the event of 30th September 1965. Economically, the trade between two countries is very strong and beneficial. China is very important for Indonesia in terms of trade, it serves as the country's largest import and export market. In 2017, Indonesia's export to China counted at US\$ 23 Billion or 13.7% of the country's total export. (Daniel, 2019) This goes the same for

Indonesia's import as China is the top as it amounted at US\$ 35.8 Billion or 22.8% of its overall imports.

Lately, the relationship is strengthened with Indonesia's decision to grant China a multi-billion-dollar railway project.(ABC News, n.d.) Based on the importance of the relation between the two countries, it makes sense that both of these countries to avoid further escalation over the South China Sea dispute to maintain the trade and economic relationship that has been going strong over the years.The importance of avoiding further escalation on South East China Sea dispute combined with the fact that South East China Sea is very important for China,(Fravel, 2016) make quite a big complication. China surely needs a leverage on Indonesia if it wants to have bigger control over how the dispute goes. The search for leverage is finally over and it comes in the form of a separatist movement in the eastern Indonesia called the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP).

The Threat Posed by China in the Eastern Border of Indonesia Following the West Papua Issue

Recently, Vanuatu brought up West Papua issue into the United Nations. The prime minister of Vanuatu, CharlotSalwaiTabimasmias, mentioned human rights violence in West Papua by Indonesian Government in his speech at the 21st September 2017 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).(United Nations General Assembly, 2017) This sparked a debate over West Papua issue that resulted in the condemnation of the human rights violation by many nations and called for an investigation over the matter.(RadioNewZealand, n.d.) The debate, condemnation and the investigation helped the ULMWP to gain traction on its effort to liberate West Papua. As time goes on, the Indonesian government is getting more and more pressure to address this issue. The main theme of the issue raised on ULMWP is very interesting and important as it has something to do with humanity and human rights, one of the highly discussed and scrutinized issue in the modern world. Combining fact that the ULMWP issue was brought up in the UNGA in 21st September 2017 and the theme of the issue itself have made it easy for ULMWP to gain traction in the international stage. The main point of the issue that was raised in UNGA was that there are many human rights violation and killings that occurred ever since West Papua integrated into Indonesia in 1969 via the *PenentuanPendapat Rakyat*. Interestingly, Indonesia has history of human rights violations such as the human rights violation in Timor Leste (Bon, 2010). The history of human rights violation committed by Indonesia in the past adds up to the notoriety of the West Papua case.

CONCLUSION

For years the South China Sea dispute has been the same with no further escalation or a viable resolution offered by the countries involved. For China, the opposition on this dispute is pretty hard to face especially from the ASEAN countries such as Indonesia. Furthermore, China has conflicting interest on Indonesia with the high amount of economic activities done with Indonesia, investments there and surely to find a way to neutralize Indonesia's resistance on the South China Sea dispute.

The sudden rise for the ULMWP has given China the much needed leverage on Indonesia. With that in mind Indonesia is now fighting on two fronts. The South China on the North-Western side of Indonesia where China is making gains and the separatist ULMWP in the east that has gained international attention. The pressure is high for Indonesia to solve the West Papua issue immediately and to answer for the accusation of the human rights violation there.This leverage on Indonesia can be used if Indonesia starts to increase its resistance on the South China Sea dispute. China can use its influence over the MSG countries to increase the support of the ULMWP and increase the risk of the independence of West Papua for Indonesia. However, if Indonesia does not increase its resistance on the South China Sea dispute, China still stands to make gains in South China Sea and use the ULMWP as a distraction for Indonesia. It is a brilliant manoeuvre



that has put China in a very good position to subdue Indonesia on South China Sea without risking hurting the good economic relation that has been going on between China and Indonesia.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ABC News. (n.d.). Indonesia awards multi-billion-dollar railway project to China over Japan. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-30/indonesia-awards-major-rail-contract-to-china/6818082>
- AseanToday. (n.d.). Indonesia Drawing deeper into South China Sea conflict with China. Retrieved from <https://www.aseantoday.com/2016/06/indonesia-drawing-deeper-into-scs/>
- Beldi, L. (n.d.). Chinese-backed airport project in Solomon Islands not a threat to Australia, official says - ABC News. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-02/chinese-backed-airport-in-solomon-islands-nothing-to-fear/9718260>
- Bon, K. (2010). "The Demography of Genocide in Southeast Asia: The Death Tolls in Cambodia, 1975-79, and East Timor, 1975-80." *Critical Asian Studies*. 35(4):585-597. Retrieved on May 20, 2018 (<https://www.peacepalacelibrary.nl/ebooks/files/KiernanRevised1.pdf>)
- Changsen, Y. U. (2014). China ' s Economic Relations with Pacific Island Countries. Retrieved from <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/chinaresearchcentre/publications/papers/YU-Changsen-Chinas-Economic-Relations-with-Pacific-Island-Countries.pdf>
- China Daily. (n.d.). China offers aid package to Pacific Islands. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-04/05/content_560910.htm
- Cochrane, J. (2017). Indonesia , Long on Sidelines , Starts to Confront China ' s Territorial Claims. Retrieved from <https://nyti.ms/2xUBdmi>
- Connolly, P. J. (2016). Engaging China's new foreign policy in the South Pacific. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 70(5), 484-505. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2016.1194805>
- Daniel, W. (2019). Indonesia's Top Trading Partners. Retrieved from <http://www.worldstopexports.com/indonesias-top-15-import-partners/>
- Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Papua New Guinea. (n.d.). China announces initiatives to expand ties with PIF member countries. Retrieved from <http://pg.china-embassy.org/eng/zbqx/t46835.htm>
- Fravel, M. T. (2016). Why does China care so much about the South China Sea? Here are 5 reasons. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/07/13/why-does-china-care-so-much-about-the-south-china-sea-here-are-5-reasons/?utm_term=.fe798d27165a
- Guixia, L. (2015). China's development aid to Fiji: motive and method. *China and the Pacific: The View from Oceania*, (March 1979). Retrieved from <http://www.miit.gov.cn/n11293472/n11293832/n13095885/16064393.html%0Ahttps://www.victoria.ac.nz/chinaresearchcentre/programmes-and-projects/china-symposiums/china-and-the-pacific-the-view-from-oceania/24-Lyu-Guixia-Chinas-Development-Aid-to-Fiji-Motive-and->
- Pratomo, H. B. (2017). Pemerintah ganti nama Laut China Selatan jadi Laut Natuna Utara. Retrieved from <https://www.merdeka.com/uang/pemerintah-ganti-nama-laut-china-selatan-jadi-laut-natuna-utara.html>
- RadioNewZealand. (n.d.). Fiery debate over West Papua at UN General Assembly. Retrieved from <https://www.radionz.co.nz/international/programmes/datelinepacific/audio/201860156/fiery-debate-over-west-papua-at-un-general-assembly>
- Reuters. (n.d.). Indonesian minister urged to stop destroying illegal fishing boats. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/indonesia-fishing/indonesian-minister-urged-to-stop-destroying-illegal-fishing-boats-idUSL4N1P52D8>
- The Jakarta Post. (2017). China Demands Indonesia Drop New Name for Natuna Waters. 3 September 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/09/03/china-demands-indonesia-drop-new-name-for-natuna-waters.html>
- United Nations General Assembly. (2017). Sudan | General Assembly of the United Nations. Retrieved from <https://gadebate.un.org/en/72/sudan>
- Wroe, D. (2018). China eyes Vanuatu military base in plan with global ramifications. Retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/china-eyes-vanuatu-military-base-in-plan-with-global-ramifications-20180409-p4z8j9.html>