

Pacific Island Countries Supporting Papua to Separate from Indonesia: Where Does the U.S. Stand?

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ABSTRACT

Pacific Island Countries, such as Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu, have been supporting the separatist movement in Papua, Indonesia. There have been suspicions that great power countries, for example the U.S., are behind them. The research finds out that the U.S. is against the idea of separating Papua from Indonesia because the entailed instability and insecurity will badly affect its mining business in Papua, represented by Freeport. However, by using foreign policy and proxy war framework, this research manages to explain that there is a possibility of a proxy war between the U.S. and China for dominance in the Pacific Islands Region. They ram Indonesia against Pacific Island Countries, with the separatism issue of Papua as the focal point. This research uses a qualitative method, which is suitable for analyzing social and political phenomena. The research data is obtained from secondary data, such as research reports, articles, and publications about the separatism movement in Papua

INTRODUCTION

There have been numerous separatist movements in Papua, and not all of them are referred to by the term of Free Papua Organization (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka/OPM*), as they are widely known. They are under different organizations, such as the West Papua National Committee (*Komite Nasional Papua Barat/KNPB*) and the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (*ULMWP*). In general, these movements are grouped into the Papuan Separatist Groups (*Kelompok Separatist Papua/KSP*). If they commit violence using lethal weapons, they will be categorized as Armed Criminal Groups (*Kelompok Kriminal Bersenjata/KKB*) (Nurwulansari, et al, 2011).

Nurwulansari and several other researchers who wrote an article entitled "Strategi Pemerintah dalam Menghadapi Proxy War sebagai Salah Satu Penyebab Gerakan Separatisme di Indonesia" (The Government's Strategy to Tackle Proxy Wars causing Separatist Movement in Indonesia), summarized several events that can describe the history of the conflict in Papua. First, OPM armed resistance broke out for the first time on 26 July 1965 in Manokwari. Second, Freeport's mining activities in 1973 triggered OPM military activity in the Timika region. Third, in May 1977, around 200 OPM guerrillas attacked Freeport, which triggered military operations, especially in the village of Amungme. Freeport's land was formerly the customary land of the Amungme and Komoro Tribes, the original inhabitants of the region. Fourth, the wave of violence that occurred around the end of 2019 resulted in eight civilians being killed in Deiyai. Fifth, the riots on 26 September 2019 resulted in 33 deaths in Wamena and four deaths in Jayapura. Sixth, on 2 December 2018, 31 workers of the Trans Papua highway project were shot dead in the Nduga region by a Papuan armed group. This event was retaliated with a military operation in the Nduga region. Amnesty International Indonesia recorded that 182 Nduga civilians died while on the run after security forces visited their village to hunt down the separatist group.

The involvement of different parties made the separatist movement possible. Various foreign political and economic entities from different countries have allegedly provided support for the separatists. During the UN General Debate, which was held from 24-27 September 2019, delegations from the Pacific Islands, such as Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu, raised the issue of human rights violations in Papua. They requested Indonesia to facilitate a visit of a mission of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to West Papua. In addition to the human rights issue, the sentiment of race similarity also emerged (We Need to Talk about West Papua Team, 2021).

The Indonesian Government considers Vanuatu's involvement as an intervention to Indonesia's sovereignty. It has suspicions that Pacific Island Countries are taking advantages of the West Papua issue for their own benefits. According to the Indonesian Government, separatist groups, such as ULMWP, collaborates with Vanuatu to internationalize the West Papua issue for money and power. Indonesia questions why the small Pacific Island nation is so passionate about fighting for the right of self-determination for the Papuan people. In other words, the Indonesian Government suspects they have vested interests (We Need to Talk about West Papua Team, 2021).

This research has reviewed several works of literature on the support of Pacific Island countries to the Papuan Separatist Groups. Various articles show linkages to China. The influence of China in the Pacific Islands region increases

due to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) program that focuses its assistance and soft loans on the development of basic infrastructure and other supporting infrastructure. China appears to be increasingly dominant in influencing the foreign policy of the region, it can even be perceived to have the capability to control the foreign policy of Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. Currently, the issue of Papua is high on the agenda of their foreign policy. They require significant amount of fund to finance the advocacy of freeing Papua from Indonesia. One of the sources are aids from China (Mesak, et al, 2020). China has a rising influence over the Melanesian Spearhead Group/MSG (composed Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front of New Caledonia). This condition is worrisome to Indonesia. Furthermore, the relations between Indonesia and China have been encumbered by the South China Sea dispute. It is a feasibility for China, with regards to their influence over the MSG countries, to use the West Papua issue for pressuring Indonesia regarding the South China Sea dispute (Prakoso, et al, 2022).

Referring to the Sino-U.S. rivalry, China's influence over Pacific Island countries, in terms of their support to Papua separatist movement, raises a question whether the U.S. implement the same action. If China is influencing the Pacific Islands countries to support the Papuan separatist movement for its vested interests, is it possible that the U.S. is also taking a similar action? The research aims to explain the possibility of the U.S. influencing the Pacific Islands countries in their efforts to support Papua separate itself from Indonesia to their own advantages, especially when the country owns a large mining business in Papua, Indonesia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Foreign policy and proxy war theories are used to analyse the possibility of the U.S. backing the Pacific Islands Countries' support for the separatist movement in Papua. The study of foreign policy focuses on the external behaviour of states in the international/global system through their authorised representatives or governments to achieve their national interests (Perwita, 2023) and Proxy War is a confrontation between two great powers using weaker or less powerful players to avoid direct confrontation/conflict that risks fatal devastation (Badan Pendidikan dan Pelatihan Kementerian Pertahanan RI, 2020). Proxy war is conducted by major state powers by using state actors or non-state actors. The national interests of the great power countries with objective of the struggle for power and the power of influence in affecting international relations can lead to proxy war (Hidayat and Gunawan, 2017).

Proxy war is carried out using soft power, such as economic tools (Economy Power) and today take form as technological devices and information, or aid or donations from donor countries or organizations (which was also supported by donor countries) to countries in need. They are are mostly developing countries or the third world countries (Hidayat and Gunawan, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative descriptive research approach, which involves empirically analysing issues. The qualitative approach used in this study is a literature review type, where data sources are analysed from secondary data, such as articles, research reports, and publications about the separatism

movement in Papua against the backdrop of the encouragement from Pacific Island Countries. Subsequently, data are analysed inductively by collecting various relevant information related to this research. In order to create a journal report, authors used theoretical framework that guides the analysis. Incorporate concepts such as foreign policy and proxy war in relation to Sino-U.S. rivalry are applied to provide a theoretical basis for understanding the stance of the U.S. on Pacific Island Countries Supporting Papua to separate from Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Social Media War

The “war” regarding the status and situation of West Papua does not only occur in the forests of the Central Mountains of Papua, but it also takes place online on various social media platforms. Professor David Robie, the Director of the AUT Pacific Media Center and the editor of the Pacific Journalism Review (PJR), uploaded news related to the West Papua issue, with an illustration of a photo of one of the demonstration participants wearing a *koteka*, a traditional outfit worn by Papuan males to hide their genitals. Facebook removed the post unilaterally. Consequently, he accused Facebook of implementing “tyranny” and wrote two letters of protest. The story highlights the increasing concern for disadvantages of media freedom. Journalist and online forensic researcher, Benjamin Strick, revealed the results of his investigation into the disinformation campaign and media blockade in the past year. He concluded that the disinformation campaign coincided with the increasing unrest in Papua. Various disinformation contents on Papua issues, from the Indonesian Government and groups that support the Papuan Separatist Movement, were uploaded to the internet using bots, social media accounts that use robots/programs to act automatically. These are definitely bots because the uploads are timed and propagated according to an automated algorithm (Wilnas and Deora, 2020).

Wilnas and Deora emphasized how foreign researchers and non-governmental organizations had vested interests when promoting the independence of Papua. The argument was based on a comparison to China when they used social media against Hong Kong demonstrators in 2019. Bots accounts deliberately and specifically seek to sow political discord in Hong Kong, including undermining the positions and results of the protest. Twitter stated that hundreds of thousands of alleged Chinese propaganda outlets were identified and they were coordinated by the Chinese government. Regarding Indonesia’s using bot accounts to tackle the Papua issue, the act was similar to the one carried out by China to maintain Hong Kong as their integral part. The question was why foreign media, including IFJ, AUT Pacific Media Centre, Bellingcat and several local media in Papua only questioned Papua while they did not criticize China. Therefore, it was possible that they had their own agenda.

An intelligence and security analyst from the University of Indonesia, Stanislaus Riyanta, announces that no less than 500 thousand Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) that spread hoaxes and provocations related to Papua exist. He coined that as a form of proxy war. According to Riyanta, the hoaxes were carried out structurally, massively, and systematically by interested parties at home and abroad. The objective is to create war among Indonesians. Despite the fact that the provocations come from both Indonesia and abroad, the origin of most of the users are from London, Sydney, Melbourne, Berlin and New York. There is only a small percentage originating from Jakarta, even smaller from Papua. He

concluded that the Papua issue is a global conspiracy. It is not a mere domestic affair, but it involves foreign parties intending to stir up the atmosphere (Rahman, 2019).

A pro-independence Papuan figure, Benny Wenda, is often the architect behind riots in Papua. Movements carried out by the Papuan separatist groups were often sporadic and poorly coordinated armed movements. Recent years have shown that the movement has been appealing to international spectators, especially because armed hostilities are considered no longer effective to yield the desired impacts. The separation of East Timor from Indonesia, which began with an armed rebellion, proceeded with diplomatic efforts and the execution of referendum, is a clear example of a Proxy War. The Indonesian Government fears that Papua has been experiencing the similar phases that led to the separation of East Timor from Indonesia (Nurwulansari, et al, 2011).

Benny Wenda's Twitter propaganda of the free Papua issue divided into eleven topics, namely "Occupation", "media", "independence", "colonial", "today", "support", "rights", "prisoners", "Political prisoners", "people" and "Papuan". The topics were further broken down into several important topics related to the issue of an independent Papua. It was also found that support for the Papuan separatist movement was spread in several regions, including North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia (Zahidi, 2023). According to the Indonesian Government, ULMWP led by Benny Wenda collaborated with Vanuatu to internationalize the West Papua issue for money and power. The money is useful for him to spread his propaganda globally through social media (We Need to Talk about West Papua Team, 2021). Vanuatu has been giving financial support to the separatist and China possibly fund it. How about the U.S.?

2. U.S.-China Rivalry

In order to see the possibility of the U.S. supporting the Pacific Island countries in their efforts to separate Papua from Indonesia, it is important to examine the U.S. foreign policy concerning its rivalry with China. In a speech during the 2023 Shangri-la Dialogue, the Indonesian Prime Minister Prabowo Subianto conveyed that, "the security situation in the Indo-Pacific, especially in Asia, in East Asia, is one dominated primarily by tensions rising from the rise of China to become, again, a great world power. And this is interfaced with the United States' role as a preeminent global power. History teaches us when a rising great power meets a preeminent global power, tensions do arise and the historical record shows many of these conflicts result in open conflict ... this rivalry, some have suggested, has turned into a new Cold War ... the Second Cold War." He stressed the catastrophic possibility of the rivalry (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023).

Geoffrey Garrett conveys that since Barack Obama made a "pivot" to Asia in 2011, the approach of U.S. to Asia has focused more on geopolitics than on geo-economics. It has been exemplified by increased U.S. military presence in Asia, coupled with its abandoning the Trans-Pacific Partnership. On the contrary, in its approach to Asia, China has been emphasizing geo-economics over geopolitics, illustrated by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and its aggressive Belt and Road Initiative (See Figure 1 and Figure 2.).

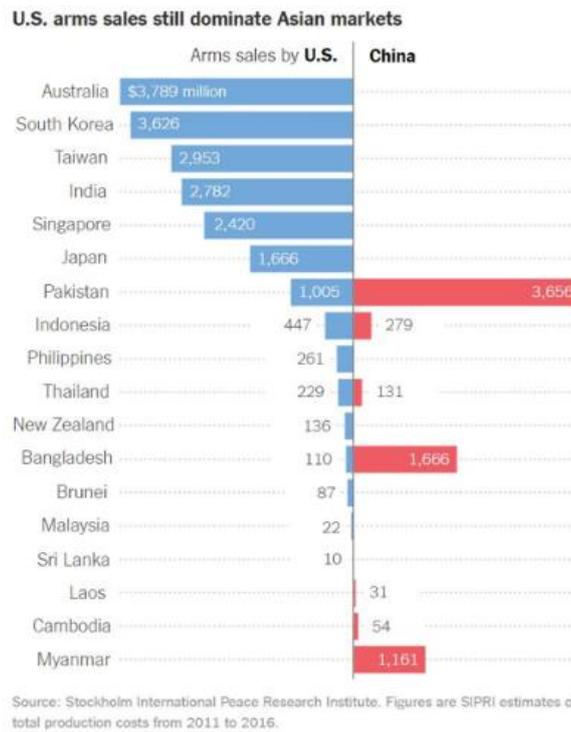


Figure 1. U.S. Arms Sales Still Dominates ASEAN Market (2011-2016)
Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Garrett, 2018)

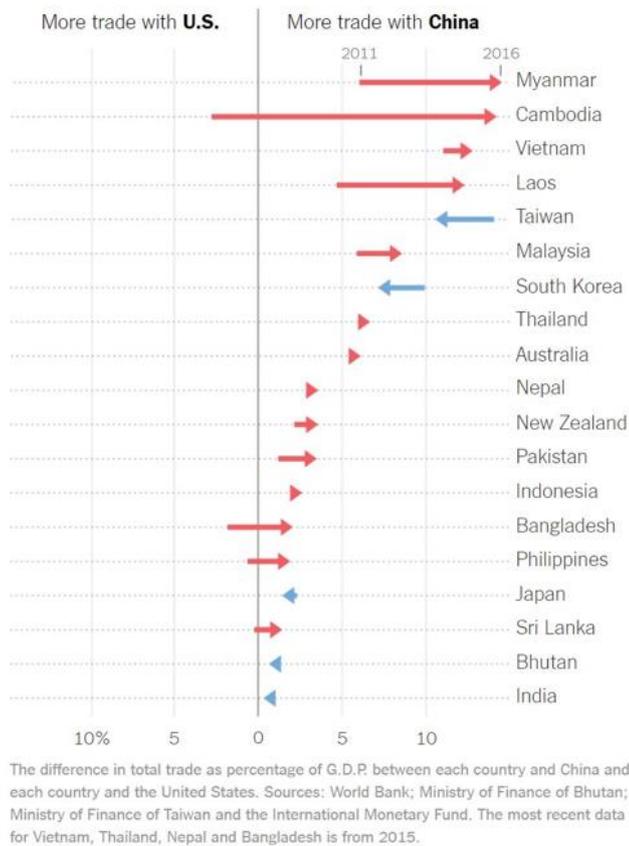


Figure 2. Asia Has More Trade with China (2011-2016)
Source: Wharton Magazine, (Garrett, 2018)

Despite their competition, neither the U.S. nor China wants to inflict a direct physical blow on the other because that would damage themselves. They prefer wrestling for influence by flexing their muscles, including in Asia. Their actions have been making increasingly difficult for countries in the region to balance between the two great powers. Despite the fact that different parts of Asia will lean more into one direction than the other, completely taking the side of the U.S. over China or vice versa is not an easy decision (Garrett, 2018).

The U.S.-China rivalry also roams the Pacific Islands. Because these islands are scattered across the vast Pacific Ocean, the region has geostrategic importance. Controlling the region was crucial in World War II, both for maintaining lines of logistic supply and in projecting military power. Since the war, the Pacific has largely enjoyed a benign status on the geographical stage, but this has changed with China's growing presence in the region. Since 2006, China's trade, aid, and diplomatic activities in the Pacific have expanded steadily and significantly. With the exception of Papua New Guinea, bilateral trade with China has surpassed trade with Australia since 2013. Two-way trade with China accounts for 46% of total trade in the Solomon Islands. China's aid activities have also improved enormously. From 2006 to 2017, China gave closely to US\$1.5 billion to the Pacific Island region in the form of grants and loans (Pryke 2020).

In 2022, China is a main donor in the Pacific alongside traditional development partners. When in January 2022 volcanic eruption and tsunami disaster hit Tonga, China exhibited its commitment to providing aid to the region by deploying its air force, navy, and embassies in both Tonga and Fiji, as well as Chinese state-owned enterprises. These entities were responsible for delivering relief supplies to Tonga. Even more notable are its pledges of assistance to the Solomon Islands, which amounted to US\$140.4 million (See Table 1), designated to the construction and development of national sports stadium and ongoing projects consisting of university dormitory complex, comprehensive medical centre at the National Referral Hospital and 161 mobile phone towers (Zhang, 2022).

Table 1. China's Financial Assistance to the Solomon Islands for Various Projects as of 2022

Projects	Financial Assistance (Million US\$)
National Sports Stadium	53
University Dormitory Complex	21.4
Comprehensive Medical Centre at the National Referral Hospital, 161 Mobile Phone Towers	66
Total	140.4

Source: Lowy Institute

The Chinese Government reported that the country had financially assisted no less than 100 projects in the Pacific. The donation included 200 batches of in-kind support and trainings for 10,000 local professionals, which had been conducted since the 1970s. A more detailed data is provided by the 2022 Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map. It mentioned that China aided nearly US\$3.148 billion to the region from 2008 to 2020. An amount of US\$3.145 billion was distributed bilaterally and approximately US\$2.7 million was provided for regional purposes

(See Table 2). The U.S. is among challengers to Chinese aid to Pacific Islands (Zhang, 2022).

Table 2. China's Financial Assistance to the Pacific Region from 2008-2020

Financial Assistance	(US\$)
Bilateral Distribution	3.145 billion
Regional Distribution	2.7 million
Total	3.148 billion

Source: Lowy Institute

In April 2022, the Solomon Islands and China inked a security agreement that sparked a number of geopolitical reactions. Despite the fact that some oppositions to the regional security agreement exist, China's diplomacy has improved its standing in the Pacific. As a result, in September 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden organized the first U.S.-Pacific Island Country Summit in Washington. The outcomes included an aid package worth US\$800 million as well as a statement of principles to direct increased U.S. engagement. This step is subsequent to previous declarations about the opening of embassies in Kiribati, Tonga, and the Solomon Islands (Carter, 2022). The U.S. Embassy in the Solomon Islands was officially opened on 27 January 2023 (U.S. Embassy to Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, 2023).

President Joe Biden planned to visit Papua New Guinea and Australia in May 2023, which was considered as stops that were aimed at demonstrating U.S. leadership in countering China, after traveling to Japan to talk to G-7 leaders about the war in Ukraine and strengthening the global economy. However, the visit to the two countries was cancelled. He said he needed to return to Washington to finish talks with congressional leaders on a deal to raise the debt ceiling (Ordones, 2023). Despite the cancellation, the plan to visit Papua New Guinea has shown that the U.S. intends to increase its presence in the Pacific Region.

Strategic analyses in both the U.S. and China have focused on the potential for a Sino-U.S. interstate war, however, great-power military competition is likely to take the form of proxy war, namely they aid rival actors in an intrastate conflict. Their competition is going to manifest as a proxy war in which the two countries aid different actors in an intrastate conflict because there is a global shift from interstate wars and toward civil wars. The U.S.-Chinese proxy wars will be a lot subtler than the rough proxy conflicts of the Cold War. Diplomatic initiatives, economic aid, cyber war, propaganda, and competition within international institutions are going to be more prominent (Tierney, 2021).

3. Possibility of Proxy War

Indonesia is currently grieving over the deaths of five TNI soldiers in Papua killed by the armed criminal group (Kelompok Kriminal Bersenjata/KKB) on 15 April 2023. The soldiers were assigned to release Susi Air Pilot Philips Max Mehrstens, who was held hostage by the KKB. The Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI-Polri) had been trying to free the hostages for two months before the incident took place. As a result, the public questioned the capabilities of the TNI-Polri in maintaining the national security. The question led to a speculation that one of the reasons for the difficulty in eradicating the KKB was external factors. So far, there have been suspicions towards great power countries, such as the U.S. The country is considered to be taking advantage of the issue of human

rights violations to provide assistance in supplying weapons to the KKB Papua. Consequently, the issue of a proxy war in Papua was raised (Pinter Politik, 2023).

In an article, a media platform Pinter Politik elaborates why Papua can become a proxy war for the U.S. Papua is undeniably attractive to foreign countries due to its natural resources. The largest gold mining company in the world from the U.S., Freeport McMoRan, Inc. operates in Papua. Due to the huge potential gains, there is a possibility that the U.S. is trying to erase "Indonesian influence" in Papua by supporting and strengthening the KKB to disrupt the security there. Insecurity in Papua can be justification for foreign countries to intervene under the pretext of maintaining the sustainability of their mining companies. The issue of human rights violations committed by the Indonesian military in Papua are raised. Without sending troops like what the U.S. has done to Iraq or Pakistan, the U.S. can have the capability to slowly control Papua. In addition, with a proxy war, the U.S. can still maintain its status as a human rights defender.

The integration of Papua into Indonesia led to the separatism issue. Many perceives foreign state actors are behind the issue. The role of the Indonesian Government to overcome the conflicts in Papua is questioned and the U.S. with Freeport seems to be another issue that possibly has a connection to several problems that occurred in Papua (Ginanjari, et al, 2022). Freeport has become one of the soft powers owned by the United States to influence the Indonesian Government. Freeport's status as the world's largest mining company, coupled with the development rhetoric it offers, seem to make the Indonesian Government prioritize economic aspects rather than security enforcement despite the ongoing conflict. In the midst of the ongoing security crisis, the U.S. continues to benefit from the results of its mining activities in Papua while it can blame Indonesia if civilians fall victims of the conflict (Pinter Politik, 2023).

V. Kusumaryati links the problem in Papua to Freeport using the framework of neo-colonialism. Corporations frequently assert that their main goal is to accumulate capital. However, in terms of history and anthropology, they have played disproportionately large political roles, particularly during colonialism, exemplified by the British East India Company and the Dutch East India Company. West Papua is home to the largest gold and copper mine in the world, operated by the American mining company Freeport-McMoRan. The company is interconnected with contemporary imperial and colonial projects in the region. Examining Freeport's pivotal role in the 1960s decolonization period of West Papua's transfer from the Dutch to Indonesia reveals how Freeport's operations in the region shaped U.S. imperial policy in the Southeast Asia. The company's relationship with the U.S. government and its contract of work with the Indonesian Government reproduce an older form of state-corporation partnership, granting to it privileges associated with exploration, trade, and colonization (Kusumaryati, 2021).

PT Freeport Indonesia was founded in April 1967. Before a 2019 shares acquisition by the Indonesian Government, Freeport – McMoran Copper & Gold Inc. owned 81.28% of the shares of the gold mining in Papua (See Figure 3.), while the Indonesian Government only held approximately 9.36% and PT Indo Copper Investama 9.36% of the shares. Freeport controls 10,000-hectare mine area with a supporting area of 202,000 hectares. The number of workers reaches 12 thousand people. Exploration of copper and gold reserves reached its peak in 2001, where

more than 140 trillion have been invested. According to data from PT Freeport Indonesia, the mine reserves currently being worked on by the company reach 2.27 billion tons of ore, consisting of 1.02% copper, 0.83 grams per tonne of gold, and 4.32 grams per tonne of silver. Based on the data from the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, production from these reserves can reach 109.5 million tons of ore per year. Apart from gold, silver and copper, Freeport also produces molybdenum and rhenium, a by-product of the copper ore process. In other words, Freeport has been obtaining abundant profits from Indonesia's wealth (Biro Administrasi Tata Laksana Rumah Tangga dan Informasi Universitas Medan Area, 2023).



Figure 3. Shares Composition of PT Freeport Indonesia (2017) and the Indonesian Government Dividend from 1991-2011
Source: PT Freeport Indonesia (Zuhri, 2017)

The Indonesian Government had been making efforts to increase its shares. They asked Freeport to gradually divest 30% of its shares. An intensive negotiation process was carried out involving the government, mining industry holding PT Inalum Persero, Freeport McMoran Inc., and Rio Tinto, a British-Australian mining company. They found a solution. In 2019, it is official that the majority share divestment of PT Freeport Indonesia has been transferred to Inalum. The company paid US\$3.85 billion to Freeport McMoran Inc. and Rio Tinto to buy part of its shares. The Inalum's ownership has increased, from only 9.36% to 51.23 (41.23% for Inalum and 10% for the local government of Papua). Nevertheless, Freeport will continue to hold its control. It has allocated US\$17.3 billion to develop US\$15 billion for underground mining and US\$2.3 billion for smelter construction (Biro Administrasi Tata Laksana Rumah Tangga dan Informasi Universitas Medan Area, 2023).

W.P. Ginanjar and colleagues argue in an article entitled "The Issue of Papua, Between Two Interests of Indonesia and the U.S." that concerning the perception that the U.S. is behind the Papua separatism issue, the U.S. is perceived to have no intention to support the separatism of Papua. However, they still raise the issue of human rights. History shows that the U.S. interest in

Papua is about keeping the sustainability of Freeport's trading process. Thus, in conducting its foreign policy, the U.S. tends to be adaptive to the Indonesian political situation (Ginanjari, et al, 2022).

This research agrees that if Papua separates itself from Indonesia, which would cause instability and insecurity there, Freeport will be badly impacted as well. Thus, the U.S. is likely to have no intention to support the separatism movement. However, concerning the efforts from the Indonesian Government to acquire more mining share previously controlled by Freeport, it is logical for Freeport to “protect” its assets from further acquisition by Indonesia. Hence, it is possible for the U.S. to amplify the notion of the human rights violation in Papua in order to deflect Indonesia’s concentration on claiming more shares. The international pressure that comes with the accusation will spread the Indonesian Government resources thinly to tackle the issue.

It is not foreseeable for the U.S. to directly attack Indonesia with the human rights violation accusation because it must maintain its amicable relation with the country that hosts its highly profitable mining company. The U.S. Government needs other actors to perform the attack and here we can see the possibility of the U.S. applying Proxy War against Indonesia by colliding it with different actors. Among the possible actors are the Pacific countries. As previously mentioned, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and the Tuvalu have been supporting Papua separatist Group, with Vanuatu rigorously backing up the movement by making it a global issue and providing it with financial aids.

Furthermore, by implementing the proxy war that makes Indonesia required to face “hostilities” from its neighbours in the Pacific Islands, the U.S. achieves another advantage with regards to its rivalry with China. The competitor is actively enhancing its influence in the Pacific region using its economic power. While the U.S. is applying a different strategy by focusing more on the issue of security, like China, it also aims to obtain stronger influence in the region. Making itself appear to be concerned about the human rights violation in Papua to the Pacific countries, and appearing to be supportive of their stance on the separatism issue in Papua, the U.S. can manage to assert more influence in the region.

The fact that the research finds more articles on China’s influencing Pacific Island countries to support Papua Separatist Group adds to the possibility of the U.S. has been implementing proxy war concerning Papua. Proxy War is conducted by major state powers by using weaker or less powerful players to avoid direct confrontations. The U.S. had been very cautious about it, therefore, during the brief study conducted, the research had difficulties to find articles identifying directly that the U.S. is behind the Pacific Island countries to support Papua separating from Indonesia. Instead, articles that directly suggest that China had been doing exactly that effort were easier to find. However, the research has been able to connect the dots by focusing on the U.S. foreign policy concerning its rivalry with China, which one of the manifestations takes form in its efforts to upstage China in the Pacific Islands region. Combined with the U.S. interest in Papua concerning Freeport, the said U.S. foreign policy opens a possibility of a proxy war between the U.S. and China, by making Indonesia and Pacific Island countries collide.

CONCLUSION

Various state and non-state actors have involved themselves in the separatism issue of Papua. Pacific Islands countries, such as Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu have been very vocal about supporting the Papua Separatist Groups. The U.S. is also suspected to muddy the water. Nevertheless, since separation of Papua from Indonesia will likely be followed by instability and insecurity, which will badly affect Freeport that has been profiting abundantly since 1967, the U.S. is perceived to have no intention to support the separatist.

Further inspection on the U.S. foreign policy, specifically on its rivalry with China in the Pacific Region, opens up a possibility of the U.S. carrying out a proxy war against China, by using Pacific Island countries. As Indonesia continues to make efforts to enlarge its shares in the gold mining business in Papua by negotiating with Freeport to reduce its shares, which the U.S. perceives as alarming for the continuity of its interest in Papua, emerges a possibility that the U.S. has been influencing the Pacific Island countries to support the separatism of Papua by emphasizing human rights violation, so Indonesia's attention on acquisitioning more mine shares will be distracted. This way, the U.S. can also assert more dominance in the Pacific Islands Region, which is in accordance with its foreign policy to compete with China's influence, especially because Bei Jing has been very aggressive as well there. Furthermore, by conducting the proxy war, Indonesia is not able to know for certain if the U.S. influences the Pacific Island countries to endorse the separatist movement in Papua; while for the Pacific Island countries backing the separatist movement, the U.S. appears to be supportive.

FURTHER STUDY

This research still has limitations, so it is necessary to carry out further research related to the topic concerning the stance of the U.S. on Pacific Island Countries supporting separatist movement in Papua. More specifically, to increase the readers' insights, further studies that can provide more assessments on the possibility of proxy war between the U.S. and China by ramming Indonesia and Pacific Island Countries with freeing Papua from Indonesia as the facade are required.

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