

Vital New Guinea

Letting Indonesia Rule the Western Area Described as Strategic Madness

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The strategic importance of New Guinea in the struggle for the world was the unemphasized but fundamental factor behind the United Nations debate last week on the fate of West New Guinea.

That debate, stimulated by Indonesians claim to Western New Guinea, could not have been more badly timed, from the military and political viewpoints. Its results can engender bitterness, reduce the prestige of the United Nations and increase unrest at a time when all of Southeast Asia and the adjacent islands are politically unstable and militarily weak and communisms nibbling conquests are continuing.

On the map of the Pacific, New Guinea lies as a barrier and rampart for Australia, a stepping stone from the Netherlands Indies to the Solomons, and a similar stepping stone from Australia to the Philippines. Its coasts provide many sites for naval and air bases and in the age of jet aircraft this large island assumes, even more than in World War II, importance for the security of Australia and as southern flank cover for the maritime routes across the Pacific.

Strategic Issue is Broad

But the strategic issue is broader than the security of Australia. Another southward tide of conquest is now sweeping over Asia; it has already engulfed China and Northern Vietnam, and in Indonesia, formerly the Dutch East Indies, it has weakened, by subversion and internal rot, what could have been an island bulwark.

The British position in Malaya, which dominates not only areas important from the point of view of raw materials but a key sea passageway from the Indian to the Pacific oceans, is now imperiled from two directions. From the North, the Communist threat looms ever stronger in weak and divided Indochina, in Thailand and in Burma. And on the south an Indonesian Government, corrupt and ineffective and increasingly influenced by communism, has only loose control over its rich and teeming island empire.

At least two members of the present Cabinet, including the Minister of Defense, are Communists or fellow-travelers; several of the rest are ultra-Nationalist opportunists, who have flirted with communism and most of them are fanatically anti-Western. There is a strong and growing Communist party in Indonesia and the Government has taken numerous measures to eliminate outspoken political opponents of communism. There

are at least two rival "governments," including the Republic of the South Moluccas, in existence, and large areas of the islands are controlled only tenuously, if at all, by the Indonesian Government.

This Government, fighting two civil wars and numerous terrorists and brigands, theoretically commands an Army of 240,000 men. But the troops, like the nation, are divided, and they are, moreover, dependent upon sea transportation and air cover for effectiveness. They have virtually none of either.

Yet strong sea power and air power have always been the only means by which an island empire could be knit into a nation. It is, and long has been, clear that Indonesia is not a nation in any full sense of the word. Its Government does not control the islands effectively; its people are not homogenous; Communist arms and Communist agents move freely by sea into and out of the country and Indonesia is not capable of withstanding attack from without or of providing internal stability. Yet this is the "nation" that demands control over Western New Guinea.

To grant such a demand would be strategic madness. For it would remove from Western New Guinea and almost certainly in time from all New Guinea the protection, not only actual but implied, of Dutch and Australian naval, air and military power. It would add another area to the vacuum of power already existing in Indonesia. More important it would expose far more openly than it is exposed now one of the largest islands in the Pacific to Communist tactics of creeping conquest.

An Axiom of Strategy

It is an axiom of strategy that political and military policies should be mutually self-supporting. But any political decision to transfer Western New Guinea to Indonesian hegemony would weaken the military position of the United States in the Pacific. Our strategy in that ocean is already essentially an insular one.

We must base our sea power and air power primarily upon islands. We do not need all of the Western Pacific islands for such bases, but we cannot tolerate Communist control of many of those islands—and certainly not New Guinea, which outflanks the Philippines and Australia. Any United States or United Nations decision to support the Indonesian claim to Western New Guinea would represent an action comparable to cutting off our political nose to spite our military face.