

Australia's Response to the West New Guinea Dispute, 1952-53

Hiroyuki Umetsu

[independent researcher]

After the Second World War, West New Guinea became an object of bitter dispute between the Netherlands and its erstwhile colony, Indonesia, over the determination of its sovereignty. Holland insisted on retaining the western half of New Guinea within the sphere of Dutch influence and Indonesia claimed annexation of the area into the new republic. For reasons of its geographic contiguity and in recognition of New Guinea's role as a strategic bulwark for its own defence, Australia took a keen interest in the determination of sovereignty over West New Guinea. It opposed the transfer of sovereignty over the western part of the island to Indonesia and sided with the Netherlands.

The period 1952-53 saw Australia taking practical action to bolster the Dutch resolve to retain full sovereignty over the western part of New Guinea and emerging Australia and the Netherlands as a de facto joint guarantor of the western half of the island. This article, based on primary sources, discusses Australia's response to the West New Guinea dispute with special emphasis on the period 1952-53, and focuses on the question why Australia embarked on practically sustaining the capacity of Holland to maintain its position as a Pacific power. This article argues that the Australian action was brought about by the worsening internal situation in Indonesia and the Dutch determination to maintain a permanent presence in West New Guinea for an indefinite period.