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OPINION

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A NEW DIPLOMACY OVER PAPUA

THE Howard Government must rethink its policy towards Papua to prevent tensions or even hostilities with Indonesia and to terminate the myths that underwrite our public sympathy for Papua independence.

This warning comes in a comprehensive paper from the Lowy Institute that finds the Papuan debate in Australia is characterised by "utopian thinking, dangerous demands and misguided analysis". These have the potential to damage Papua, threaten Australia-Indonesia relations and undermine Australia's security.

In one of the most muscular policy papers produced by the Lowy Institute, Rodd McGibbon, an Australian National University visiting fellow and regional specialist, dismantles the falsehoods that define the so-called West Papua constituency in this country.

But McGibbon has a broader objective. He warns that, over Papua, the gulf between public attitudes and Australia's core interests is dangerous and must be rectified by government. This is tied irrevocably to Australian attitudes towards Indonesia. McGibbon argues the Howard Government has been inept and has misjudged this challenge.

The task involves both foreign policy and "winning the battle of ideas in Australia". His message is that "decisive steps" from both Canberra and Jakarta will be required "if a serious disruption to the Australia-Indonesian relationship is to be averted".

The Lowy Institute's release of Pitfalls of Papua could hardly be better timed. It follows recent revelations in The Australian that the flight of the 43 boatpeople to Australia was a staged political operation planned over two years to exploit our refugee laws and maximise publicity for Papuan independence.

Despite the failure of the Howard Government's recent refugee bill, no Australian government can sit impassive and allow this situation to keep recurring.

In this context McGibbon's most potent argument is that the campaigns of the West Papua constituency in this country "make resolving the Papua issue more difficult, not less". There is one certainty: the more Australians are seen to support Papua separatism, the more Indonesian nationalism will crack down on the province and the more Australia's influence will be marginalised.

"The views and proposals put forward by Australia's West Papua constituency need to be subject to critical scrutiny," McGibbon says. "This is urgently needed as West Papuan supporters and other critics of Australian policy have engaged in myth-making that is shaping the public debate.

"They have also adopted political positions that are not only unrealistic but potentially dangerous. This critique of the bilateral relationship has found resonance in the Australian media and community, representing a serious failure of political leaders to mount a case for the importance of Indonesia to Australia's long-term security interests."

McGibbon says that Papua touches "a deep chord among Indonesia's political leaders". Given that it constitutes 20 per cent of Indonesia's territory, there is growing anxiety about the potential for foreign-promoted separatist pressures over Papua "presaging a break-up of the state".

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He warns Australian activists have created "unrealistic expectations" among Papuans over international support. They exaggerate Australia's influence over Indonesia. They grasp neither Indonesian politics nor the reaction to their tactics.

Such miscalculations are dangerous because no early settlement in Papua is likely. The outlook instead is for "continuing low-level conflict with the potential for a serious human rights incident that could spark international uproar and further refugee flows". The recent refugee uproar reveals how political leaders in Australia and Indonesia can be pressured into positions that threaten relations.

McGibbon repeatedly warns that perceptions of Australia's interference in Papua will allow Indonesian nationalists "to take the political initiative and justify a repressive approach in countering foreign elements accused of wanting to see the break-up of Indonesia."

He sketches the West Papuan constituency as a loose group of activists with the Australian Greens and Democrats its parliamentary spearhead. The Australia West Papua Association is a focal point, drawing support from figures such as John Pilger and Scott Burchill. The University of Sydney's West Papua Project is another focus. Church activists such as John Barr and Peter Woods are prominent and there are claims about backing from the Catholic church hierarchy.

However McGibbon fails to mention the extent of mainstream media support. This is the real problem. Remember that 76 per cent of Australians favour an act of self-determination in Papua, a stance that seeks the dismemberment of the Indonesian nation and that would brand Australia as an enemy.

McGibbon's paper identifies seven myths that have misled Australian opinion.

Myth one: Indonesia has engaged in genocide in Papua making it a moral imperative for Australia to intervene. The trouble here is the absence of evidence. McGibbon says:

"The flimsy evidence adopted by University of Sydney's West Papua Project indicates the ideologically driven nature of the genocide charge." This 2005 report by John Wing with Peter King is arguably the most influential report by the West Papua lobby.

Yet "it provides no evidence whatsoever of a 'deliberate intent' to eliminate a group of people which is central to the UN definition of genocide. Instead the report discusses separate themes such as illegal logging, the spread of HIV-AIDS and human rights abuses, implying, but failing to make the case that such policy impacts have added up to genocide." After surveying the evidence, McGibbon concludes there has been "a systematic pattern of rights violations by Indonesian security forces since the 1960s" but "no evidence of genocide".

Such distortions have a political aim: to intimidate Australia to press for Papuan self-determination. McGibbon refers to the argument by Deakin University's Damien Kingsbury that foreign monitors be sent to Papua to enforce the peace. This is based on misconceptions that Indonesia is highly vulnerable to outside pressure and will buckle on Papua as it buckled on East Timor.

For McGibbon, the view that Australia can "impose its will over domestic developments in Indonesia" fails to understand either "the nationalist dynamics in Indonesia" or Indonesia's "resolve in defending its sovereignty". He concludes:

"Southeast Asia's largest state, and the world's fourth most populous, does not accept definitions that incorporate it within Australia's 'sphere of influence'."

Myth two: That Australia's policy is dominated by a Jakarta lobby intent on appeasing Indonesia. This is an old charge beloved by our media. The failure to challenge such a distortion "reflects the impoverished state of the public debate". More seriously, the appeasement mindset "highlights the failure of political leaders to mount the case as to why the bilateral relationship is so crucial".

The appeasement myth survives only because of a refusal to confront the consequences for Australia of a collapsed relationship with Jakarta. This would shift our domestic politics to the Right, demand far higher defence spending and cripple our Asian engagement. McGibbon says:

"Critics of the bilateral relationship have seldom been called upon to confront the basic strategic reality that a stable, democratic Indonesia is of fundamental importance to Australian security interests. Neither has the case been effectively put to the Australian public by their leaders."

Myth three: Papua parallels the East Timor situation. It doesn't. The international situation between the two is different. Papua's incorporation into Indonesia was accepted by the main parties in a UN-sanctioned process. East Timor's annexation by Indonesia, by contrast, was condemned by the international community.

The Indonesian outlook on the two provinces was different. East Timor was tiny and, in the words of former foreign minister Ali Alatas, was a "pebble in the shoe". Papua is large, resource-rich and far more important to Indonesia. Papua, unlike East Timor, is enshrined in Indonesia's nationalist history, with former president Megawati Sukarnoputri declaring that without Papua "Indonesia is not complete."

Contrary to myth, the decision to offer East Timor a referendum was made by President Habibie and reflected a partial calculation that Indonesia might be better off without East Timor, a calculation that will not be made over Papua.

Myth four: Indonesia is a Javanese empire where democracy is a facade. In many ways this is the most disreputable and pernicious myth. It holds sway in our political culture as revealed in this week's Lowy Institute poll showing most Australians think Indonesia is "controlled by the military" and are neutral on whether Indonesia is "an emerging democracy".

For the West Papua lobby the idea of Indonesia as a sham democracy is pivotal. It denies Indonesia's legitimacy, reinforces the notion of a repressive state and, critically, rejects the obvious solution for Papua as a province within a democratic Indonesia.

McGibbon points out that John Saltford's '60s work on the Act of Free Choice claims that Papua was violently incorporated into a "centralised Javanese empire". This denies the reality of Indonesia's multi-ethnic identity.

"The founding principles of Indonesia were based on a multi-ethnic creed and a deep commitment to religious and ethnic pluralism," McGibbon says.

"Indonesia stood as an antidote to the racial and ethnic divisions of Dutch colonialism."

McGibbon says critics, such as Peter King, from the University of Sydney, play down Indonesia's democratisation and call the political system "barely reformed".

"This sweeping judgment obscures the kinds of changes that have resulted from democratisation, including far-reaching constitutional amendments and the establishment of a democratic electoral system, including direct elections for the executive," he says.

The critics overlook the new constitutional court and a vibrant free media. Such omissions are crucial. They mean critics are blind to the prospects of political change within Indonesia, thereby denying "openings for addressing Papuan grievances".

Myth five: Indonesia has latent expansionist tendencies. Denial of Indonesian democracy co-exists with its alleged expansionism. The theories are rife. For instance, a figure

in the West Papua lobby, Jacob Rumbiak, claims that before Papua New Guinea was independent "the Indonesian military government already had a long-standing plan to annex PNG".

McGibbon attacks King's claim of "Indonesian lebensraum" as "an outrageous allusion to Nazi Germany". The truth, of course, is that the entire appeasement theory of Australia's media plays on the notion of Indonesian expansionism. The theory remains devoid of evidence, with Indonesia's borders still largely following the Dutch colonial boundaries.

Myth six: Recent evidence exposes Indonesia's manipulation of 1969 Act of Free Choice. There is no dispute that this act was not a genuine democratic plebiscite. The facts, however, are that the originating 1962 agreement accepted the reality of Indonesian sovereignty. The 1969 process was "a face-saving device for the Dutch", who had to endure a humiliating defeat over Papua.

The 1969 act authorised what most of the international community had already decided: that Papua was Indonesian. This act, therefore, was "not a conspiracy" but "an open act of realpolitik that was accepted by the main international actors".

Myth seven: As Melanesian Christians, Papuans should be separated from Indonesia. This line has been pushed by church activists. It means that Australians claiming to be multicultural would deny Indonesia's ability to be multicultural. This argument is patronising and offensive. It obscures the multi-ethnic basis of Indonesia and the commitment of successive leaders to ethnic pluralism (it was one of Suharto's obsessions and was explicit in Sukarno's nationalism).

Indonesia has had a troubled history realising these multicultural ideals. Such difficulty, McGibbon says, "does not justify the crude Asian versus Melanesian dichotomy that often underpins the arguments of West Papuan supporters in Australia".

He argues that the best overall solution for Papua lies in a system of special autonomy within Indonesia. This will not be achieved easily given the struggle now under way within Indonesia between advocates and opponents of special autonomy.

McGibbon says the challenge for Australia is to craft a new diplomacy. This begins with directly confronting Indonesian perceptions that Australia is supporting separatism. This is a condition for "any longer-term Australian role".

It demands a new series of confidence building measures with Jakarta: a bilateral security agreement with a clause that recognises Indonesian sovereignty; border security co-operation with Indonesia; further bilateral defence co-operation; and Australia's support for a Southeast Asian security community. At the same time Australian assistance to Papua should be intensified.

These efforts need backing by more information in Australia about Papua, better education about Indonesian democracy and a renewed commitment to explaining the importance of Australia-Indonesian relations. Ultimately, it is a battle of ideas. The balance at present is heavily on the negative side.