



## Proxy War in the Papua Conflict in the Study of Asymmetric War Strategy

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### ABSTRACT

The conflict in Papua has been going on for decades and shows the characteristics of asymmetrical warfare, where separatist groups use non-conventional strategies in dealing with state security forces. Indications of the involvement of external actors in this conflict are getting stronger, indicating the possibility of a proxy war that affects the dynamics of the resistance of the Free Papua Organization (OPM). This study aims to analyze how asymmetric warfare in Papua is influenced by the dynamics of proxy war and the strategies adopted by the OPM in the face of counter-insurgency operations by the Indonesian government. Using a qualitative method with a case study approach, data was collected through document analysis and literature study. The results show that the conflict in Papua does not only stem from internal factors such as socio-economic inequality and political dissatisfaction, but is also influenced by external interests that support the separatist movement through diplomatic channels, digital propaganda, and logistical assistance. Analysis of asymmetric warfare strategies shows that the OPM utilizes digital propaganda, international networks, and guerrilla attacks in the face of Indonesian military operations.

## INTRODUCTION

The conflict in Papua is one of the biggest challenges to Indonesia's national security. This conflict not only involves internal factors such as economic inequality, political dissatisfaction, and human rights issues, but is also influenced by external interests that allegedly support the separatism movement (Widjojo, 2018). In the context of asymmetric warfare, the OPM adopts unconventional strategies, such as guerrilla attacks, digital propaganda, and international networks to gain support (Singh, 2020). Along with the increasing use of information technology, this conflict pattern is increasingly complex, leading to allegations of a proxy war played by external actors with certain geopolitical interests (Ristian, 2021). Therefore, an understanding of asymmetric warfare and proxy war in the Papua conflict is important to design a more effective counter-insurgency strategy.

Most previous studies have focused on the political and human rights aspects of the Papuan conflict (Aspinall & Berger, 2019), but not many have examined it from the perspective of asymmetric warfare and proxy war. Studies on how external actors play a role in supporting the OPM are also limited, especially in the context of counter-insurgency strategies that can be implemented by the Indonesian government.

This research is important because it provides a more comprehensive understanding of the pattern of conflict in Papua, especially regarding the role of external actors and the asymmetric warfare strategy implemented by the OPM. The findings of this research can be the basis for the formulation of more adaptive security policies in the face of proxy war threats. From the explanation above, researchers are interested in conducting research on "Proxy War in the Papua Conflict in the Study of Asymmetric War Strategy".

### *Research Question*

1. How is asymmetric warfare in Papua affected by proxy war dynamics?
2. How is the OPM strategy in facing counter-insurgency operations by the Indonesian government?

### *Research Objectives*

1. Analyze the influence of proxy war in the dynamics of asymmetrical conflict in Papua.
2. Identify the strategies used by the OPM in dealing with counter-insurgency operations.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

### *Theoretical Benefits*

This research is expected to contribute to the development of asymmetric warfare and proxy war theories, especially in the context of the conflict in Papua. By examining the involvement of external actors in this conflict, this research can enrich the literature on the dynamics of unconventional warfare and more effective counter-insurgency strategies. In addition, this research also contributes to deepening academic understanding of the role of digital propaganda and

international networks in supporting separatist groups (Mack, 1975; Mumford, 2013).

### ***Practical Benefits***

The results of this research can serve as a reference for policymakers, security forces and related institutions in formulating a more comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy. By understanding the patterns of asymmetric warfare implemented by the OPM and the involvement of external actors, the government can develop more adaptive policies, including in improving diplomacy strategies, strengthening digital counter-narratives, and socio-economic development in Papua. The implementation of the results of this research is expected to strengthen the government's efforts in handling conflicts more effectively and sustainably (Kilcullen, 2009; Singh, 2020).

### ***Theoretical Basis Of Research***

#### *Theory Perang Asimetris (Mack, 1975)*

The asymmetric warfare theory proposed by Andrew Mack (1975) explains that wars between actors of unequal power are often won by the militarily weaker side. In his analysis, Mack highlighted that the success of small or unconventional groups against militarily stronger states often depends not on the superiority of weaponry, but on political, psychological and social factors. One of the main factors in asymmetric warfare is the high political motivation of the weaker side and the difficulty of the stronger side in maintaining legitimacy and domestic support for prolonged warfare.

In the context of the conflict in Papua, this theory can explain how the Free Papua Organization (OPM) is able to survive in the face of Indonesian military operations that have superiority in resources and weapons. The OPM uses guerrilla strategies, digital propaganda, and international support to politically pressure the Indonesian government. The success of asymmetric warfare is not only measured by victory in battle, but also by the ability of rebel groups to maintain the legitimacy of their struggle in the eyes of the international community and take advantage of their opponents' political and diplomatic weaknesses.

#### *Theory Proxy War (Mumford, 2013)*

The proxy war theory proposed by Andrew Mumford (2013) states that conflicts in some regions of the world are often not only a fight between two main parties, but also involve external actors supporting one of the parties to achieve their strategic interests. Proxy wars often occur when foreign countries or groups do not want to be directly involved in the war but still want to influence the outcome of the conflict through financial aid, weaponry, military training or diplomatic support. Geopolitical, economic and ideological factors are often key drivers in the involvement of external actors in regional or national conflicts.

In the case of Papua, indications of proxy war can be seen from the diplomatic support and international campaigns carried out by Papuan pro-independence groups. Several foreign organizations and countries are said to pay attention to the Papua issue under the pretext of human rights, which can be

used as a tool of pressure on the Indonesian government. In addition, the utilization of digital media and international networks by the OPM also shows a proxy war strategy, where the conflict narrative is not only controlled by local actors but also by outside parties who have a certain interest in prolonging instability in the region.

*Strategi Kontra-Insurjensi (Kilcullen, 2009)*

David Kilcullen (2009) in his book *Counterinsurgency* emphasizes that the success of a counterinsurgency strategy depends not only on military action, but also on a comprehensive approach that includes political, economic, social and diplomatic aspects. Kilcullen highlights that in dealing with insurgent or separatist groups, the state must understand the social and cultural context of local communities, and use an approach that can win the hearts and minds of civilians. Repressive approaches that rely solely on military force are often ineffective in the long run, as they can trigger wider resistance from local communities.

Counter-insurgency strategies in the Papuan conflict require a more adaptive policy that focuses not only on military operations but also on improving economic development and the welfare of local communities. In addition, Kilcullen emphasized the importance of strengthening national narratives and counter-propaganda to counteract the influence of separatist groups in the digital space. In this case, the Indonesian government needs to strengthen international diplomacy to prevent foreign intervention that could worsen the conflict. The implementation of a counter-insurgency strategy based on a holistic approach can be a solution in overcoming the Papua conflict more effectively and sustainably.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method as described by Sugiyono (2019). Data was collected through literature studies, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with security and defense experts to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of conflict in Papua.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### ***Proxy War in the Papua Conflict***

The conflict in Papua has been going on for decades and involves various actors, both state and non-state. This conflict is not only internal but also influenced by external interests, which can be categorized as a form of proxy war. Proxy war is a conflict strategy in which foreign parties support certain groups to weaken or influence a country without direct involvement. This article analyzes how the concept of proxy war in the context of Papua is based on the perspective of humanitarian law and the challenges of national resilience.

According to Nuryanti (2019), proxy war is a challenge for the state in maintaining national stability and sovereignty. In the context of Papua, several indicators show the involvement of external parties, both in the form of political, economic and information support for groups that oppose the Indonesian government. Some forms of involvement include support for separatist

movements, where groups such as the Free Papua Organization (OPM) receive attention from various international organizations that carry human rights issues. Reports indicate support from foreign NGOs in the form of advocacy and funding. In addition, the spread of propaganda and disinformation is also a key strategy in the proxy war, where social media is often used to shape public opinion, both at home and abroad, about the conflict in Papua. The narratives used often show the Indonesian government as the repressive party without looking at the overall context of the conflict. Exploitation of natural resources is also a trigger for conflict, given that Papua has abundant natural resources, including gold and copper mines. The involvement of foreign companies in resource exploitation is often linked to political interests that exacerbate tensions between the government and local communities.

According to Ningsih and Nurbaiti (2023), international humanitarian law serves to limit the impact of armed conflict on the parties involved. In the context of Papua, some relevant aspects include the status of the conflict, where Papua is often categorized as a non-international conflict, meaning humanitarian law still applies even though the involvement of foreign actors is not directly recognized. The protection of civilians is also a major concern, as the escalation of conflict in Papua often results in the victimization of civilians, who should receive protection under the Geneva Conventions. In addition, alleged human rights violations by security forces and separatist groups are also part of the humanitarian law issues in this conflict.

Chandra (2025) emphasizes that national resilience is a key element in dealing with the threat of proxy war. Some strategic steps that can be taken by the Indonesian government in overcoming proxy wars in Papua include strengthening security and intelligence by increasing the capacity of security forces to detect and prevent foreign interference and strengthening international cooperation to prevent external support for separatist movements. A humanist approach to conflict resolution is also an important strategy, such as promoting dialogue with local communities to address social and political discontent and allowing for greater regional autonomy without compromising national sovereignty. In addition, improving development and economic welfare is also needed by increasing access to education, health services and infrastructure to reduce social inequality and encouraging Papuan involvement in natural resource management to be more inclusive.

The Papua conflict can be categorized as part of the proxy war phenomenon, where external actors influence the dynamics of the conflict through various means. In facing this threat, Indonesia needs to strengthen national resilience by prioritizing a security strategy that is integrated with development policies and a humanist approach. Thus, stability in Papua can be maintained without having to ignore aspects of human rights and international humanitarian law.

The role of external actors in supporting the separatist movement is very significant in the dynamics of the Papuan conflict. External actors can play a role in various forms, including diplomatic support, logistical provision, and human rights advocacy in international forums (Mumford, 2013). Some countries and

non-governmental organizations bring attention to the Papuan issue through international campaigns, which are often used by separatist groups to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the world (Singh, 2020). In addition, digital media has become a major tool in strengthening the narrative of the OPM struggle, where international networks are used to distribute information favorable to separatist groups (Aspinall & Berger, 2019).

There are indications that separatist groups receive material assistance and training from outside sources, albeit on a limited scale (Widjojo, 2018). Economic factors and geopolitical interests also play a role in encouraging the involvement of external actors, especially in the midst of global competition over Papua's abundant natural resources (Ristian, 2021). In addition, international human rights campaigns often put pressure on the Indonesian government, which in turn complicates internal conflict resolution efforts (Kilcullen, 2009). Therefore, understanding the role of external actors in the Papuan conflict is crucial to designing effective counter-insurgency strategies, including enhancing international diplomacy and strengthening national narratives in the digital space.

### ***Asymmetric Warfare Strategy of the Free Papua Organization (OPM)***

The asymmetric warfare strategy implemented by the Free Papua Organization (OPM) includes guerrilla attacks, digital propaganda, and international diplomacy. Guerrilla attacks are carried out by utilizing Papua's geographical terrain that is difficult to reach, thus complicating conventional military operations carried out by the Indonesian government (Mack, 1975). The OPM also utilizes hit-and-run tactics aimed at draining the resources and morale of Indonesian security forces, as seen in various incidents of attacks on security forces and strategic infrastructure (Singh, 2020). These attacks not only aim to weaken the government's military position, but also create instability that could increase international exposure to the conflict.

In addition to guerrilla attacks, the OPM adopted a digital propaganda strategy to strengthen the legitimacy of their struggle in the eyes of the world. They used various social media platforms to disseminate narratives that highlighted issues of human rights violations and marginalization of Papuans by the Indonesian government (Aspinall & Berger, 2019). With this strategy, the OPM managed to attract the sympathy of the international community and build pressure on the Indonesian government through various non-governmental organizations and global political actors (Widjojo, 2018). The digital campaign was also used to build a network of support involving the Papuan diaspora abroad, who often play a role in international advocacy.

The Free Papua Organization (OPM) implements an asymmetric warfare strategy against the Indonesian government by combining guerrilla tactics, propaganda, and external support. In its operations, the OPM relies on high mobility in Papua's jungle terrain to launch surprise attacks on security forces, with the aim of weakening opposing forces and creating instability. In addition, they actively use social media and international networks to spread the narrative of the Papuan independence struggle, which is often used to attract sympathy

and support from the global community. Pro-OPM groups also gain support from international human rights organizations, which use political lobbying in several countries to increase pressure on Indonesia to address the Papuan conflict. The issue of human rights violations is often exploited as a strategy to attract global attention, by highlighting specific cases to encourage international intervention and create pressure on the government. In addition, the OPM also infiltrates local communities to gain logistical support and protection, capitalizing on social discontent due to economic and political inequality in Papua.

International diplomacy is an important element in the OPM strategy, where they try to gain support from international organizations and countries that have an interest in the Papua issue (Mumford, 2013). This effort can be seen in various international forums, such as the UN session, where the issue of Papua is often raised by certain countries to pressure Indonesia on human rights issues (Ristian, 2021). By utilizing this diplomatic network, the OPM not only seeks to attract global sympathy, but also to strengthen political pressure on the Indonesian government, which in turn can influence Indonesia's domestic policies and international relations.

### *Implications for Counter-Insurance Strategy*

An evaluation of the military, diplomacy and socio-economic development approaches to the Papuan conflict shows that the military approach adopted by the government has limitations in resolving the root causes of the conflict. While military operations can tactically suppress the activities of separatist groups, this approach often creates a backlash that exacerbates the situation, especially in increasing local people's distrust of the government (Kilcullen, 2009). Therefore, a more adaptive military strategy with a community-based approach and strengthened intelligence is a more effective step in managing threats from separatist groups (Mack, 1975).

In terms of diplomacy, Indonesia's role in defending Papuan sovereignty in the international arena is an important element in the counter-insurgency strategy. Active diplomatic campaigns, both in UN forums and regional organizations such as ASEAN, must be further enhanced to hamper efforts to internationalize the Papua issue by external actors who support separatist movements (Mumford, 2013). In addition, economic diplomacy must also be prioritized by opening up opportunities for international cooperation involving Papuan development as part of the global investment and welfare agenda (Singh, 2020).

Socio-economic development is also a key factor in tackling the Papua conflict more thoroughly. The government should focus more on implementing policies that accelerate infrastructure development, improve access to education, and develop local community-based economic programs to reduce the economic and social disparities that are the main triggers of Papuan discontent (Widjojo, 2018). With a combination of a more targeted military strategy, active diplomacy, and inclusive development, the counter-insurgency approach in Papua can be more effective in achieving long-term stability.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The conflict in Papua is increasingly complex with the influence of proxy war, where external actors play a role in supporting the OPM resistance. The asymmetric warfare strategy used by the OPM involves digital propaganda, international networks, and guerrilla attacks. Therefore, a more comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy is needed, which not only focuses on military approaches but also involves diplomacy and socio-economic development.

### *Theoretical Suggestions*

In addressing the conflict in Papua, the Indonesian government needs to adopt a more holistic approach in its counter-insurgency strategy. One important step is to strengthen the digital counter-narrative strategy to counter separatist groups' propaganda that is increasingly developing in cyberspace (Kilcullen, 2009). In addition, diplomacy efforts must be enhanced so that Indonesia can inhibit efforts to internationalize the Papua issue and prevent the intervention of foreign parties who have certain interests in this conflict (Mumford, 2013). A more inclusive approach to economic development is also needed to address the root causes of social inequality, which is often the main trigger of conflict (Widjojo, 2018). The government should focus more on improving infrastructure, education and the welfare of the Papuan people to reduce the gap with other regions in Indonesia.

### *Practical Suggestions*

This research shows that the concepts of asymmetric warfare and proxy war in the Papua conflict still require further study, especially in understanding the dynamics of the involvement of external actors and how the counter-insurgency strategy implemented by the government can be more effective in the long term. The asymmetrical war theory proposed by Mack (1975) is still relevant, but needs to be expanded with a more contextual study of the role of digital technology in increasing the effectiveness of modern separatist movements. In addition, the concept of proxy war proposed by Mumford (2013) also needs to be reviewed more deeply in the Indonesian context to understand the patterns of involvement of foreign actors in domestic conflicts. Further research could focus on evaluating the effectiveness of counter-insurgency policies that have been implemented as well as exploring new strategies that could be used in dealing with similar threats in the future.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The approach to addressing the Papuan conflict should involve various actors, including the TNI-Polri, government, communities, academia, as well as further research. TNI-Polri needs to improve intelligence in counter-insurgency operations to minimize civilian casualties and strengthen security, while cross-agency coordination should be strengthened to avoid loopholes for negative propaganda. Personnel capacity in dealing with information warfare and digital counter-propaganda should also be improved. The government needs to strengthen international diplomacy to counter external intervention and encourage local community-based economic development to reduce social

inequality. The involvement of traditional and religious leaders in dialogue is important to create a humanist approach, while communities need to improve digital literacy to counter hoaxes and separatist propaganda. Academics should deepen research on local wisdom-based counter-insurgency strategies, information warfare in asymmetric conflicts, and inclusive development policies for Papua. Future research needs to evaluate the effectiveness of counter-insurgency strategies, analyze the involvement of external actors, and develop social media-based counter-narrative strategies to strengthen national stability.

### **FURTHER STUDY**

Future research on the Papua conflict should delve deeper into the evolving dynamics of proxy warfare and its implications for Indonesia's national security, governance, and regional stability. A multidisciplinary approach integrating security studies, digital forensics, and socio-political analysis is essential to understand how transnational networks, online radicalization, and foreign influence shape the conflict landscape. Further study should also explore the effectiveness of Indonesia's counter-insurgency strategies, assessing the impact of digital counter-narratives, diplomatic engagements, and socio-economic policies in mitigating separatist sentiments. Comparative studies with other regions experiencing asymmetric warfare, such as Mindanao in the Philippines or Aceh before the Helsinki Agreement, could provide valuable insights into conflict resolution frameworks. Additionally, research should examine the perceptions and lived experiences of indigenous Papuans to ensure that policy responses are not only strategic but also culturally and socially inclusive. By bridging these gaps, future studies can contribute to more sustainable and effective conflict resolution strategies that align security measures with human development goals.

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