Ongoing troubles in the West Papua region, and the unwanted attention they have garnered, are a sore spot for Indonesian authorities. They undermine the larger narrative of an Indonesia finally at peace with itself, consolidating its democracy and putting the ghosts of its past human rights abuses to bed. Indonesia’s energetic campaign to engage its Melanesian neighbors and block Papuan aspirations for a seat in the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) was a predictable response. Last week’s decision from the MSG leaders’ summit also shows it was a successful campaign, but only partly.

The leaders of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and New Caledonia’s Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front on June 26 finally settled the question of West Papuan membership in the MSG, at least for now. The long-awaited decision turned out to be a compromise that didn’t entirely satisfy anyone—the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) was granted observer status in the group, while Indonesia was upgraded from an observer to an associate member. The compromise is messy, but probably better than the alternatives—alienating Indonesia or being seen as forsaking Papuan aspirations.

The MSG has been struggling with the question of Papuan membership for the last few years. Unlike most of the rest of the world, the public and governments in the Pacific in general and Melanesia in particular remain
The Upside of Melanesian Leaders’ West Papua Compromise (continued)

Papua New Guinea prime minister Peter O’Neill (left) during a 2013 visit to New Zealand. O’Neill, who has spoken more forcefully in recent months about West Papuan rights, was a strong proponent of having elected Melanesian governors represent Indonesia as an associate member of the Melanesian Spearhead Group. https://www.flickr.com/photos/nznationalparty/9458409266/

acutely aware of the ongoing human rights situation and supportive of the struggle for greater self-determination in West Papua (referring to the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua). The group set aside the membership bid of the Vanuatu-based West Papua National Council for Liberation in June 2013 pending a fact-finding mission to Jayapura—the capital of Papua Province—and Jakarta. MSG leaders then determined that the bid was not sufficiently representative of Papuan voices.

Papuans in exile responded by submitting another bid under the ULMWP, a new umbrella organization encompassing several Papuan separatist organizations. The back-to-back membership bids helped put the issue of West Papua back on the regional agenda in a way it has not been in decades. Then-prime minister of Vanuatu Moanna Carcasses took to the floor of the United Nations in 2013 to demand that a special representative be appointed to examine human rights abuses in West Papua and an investigation be launched into the legitimacy of Indonesia’s 1969 annexation of the region. A diplomatic row erupted when a “Freedom Flotilla” from Australia made a symbolic, and perhaps illegal, visit to Indonesian waters and met with Papuan leaders offshore.

The MSG’s decision is certainly a disappointment to many pro-independence Papuans. But the ULMWP made clear before the summit that it would accept observer status as a partial victory. In the wake of the decision, Papuans seem generally pleased, though some ULMWP leaders questioned the fairness of Indonesia’s associate membership. Jakarta, on the other hand, remains reticent. Indonesian authorities appear worried that the observer status extended to the ULMWP is a first step toward full membership, even though MSG leaders were clear that the ULMWP will only represent Papuans in exile within the organization. Jakarta also recognizes, correctly, that the group’s decision is a recognition that, at least in the eyes of Indonesia’s Pacific neighbors, Papuans have legitimate grievances that will not be swept under the rug.

So far, Indonesia’s pique at the decision to grant the ULMWP observer status might be outweighing satisfaction with its own upgrade to associate membership. That is a mistake. Admittedly, Jakarta might balk at the conditions placed on its membership—the MSG leaders want to see Indonesia represented not by the president but by the governor of one of the five Indonesian provinces with substantial Melanesian populations: East Nusa Tenggara (which includes West Timor), Maluku, North Maluku, Papua, and West Papua. But this could prove a blessing in disguise.
The Upside of Melanesian Leaders’ West Papua Compromise (continued)

The waning months of the administration of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono saw an effort to develop a system of greater local autonomy for Papua and West Papua provinces. The governors of each province developed their own draft plans for the new system, but political attention drifted as Yudhoyono became a lame duck, and the effort has not been picked up by his successor, President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo. It is worth noting, however, that one of the more creative proposals in the more robust of the two draft plans—and the only one likely to address Papuan grievances—was for West Papua to represent Indonesia in Pacific regional architecture. The MSG has now provided an avenue for Jakarta to fulfill that request.

Since his campaign for the presidency, Jokowi has committed in his rhetoric to address Papuan grievances and improve the human rights situation in the region. But so far, he has nothing to show for it. His own minister rebutted a plan to end Jakarta’s long-standing policy of promoting the migration of non-Papuans to the region; his army chief effectively contradicted an announcement that foreign journalists would have unrestricted access to the two provinces; and the House of Representatives rejected a plan to release dozens of Papuan political prisoners. It is therefore unsurprising that cautious optimism regarding Jokowi has turned to cynicism among many Papuans. Appointing a Papuan governor to represent Indonesia in the MSG could offer Jokowi a small but much-needed win.

The MSG could offer a useful avenue for Indonesian authorities to engage the concerns of its Melanesian neighbors as well as pro-independence
Papuans. Solomon Islands prime minister and this year’s MSG chair Manasseh Sogavare was clear that one reason for the compromise decision by the group was to provide a venue for dialogue between the two sides. Ignoring, and criminalizing, Papuan demands for self-determination has not helped Indonesia end the region’s persistent insurgency or improve the lot of average Papuans. Dialogue is worth a try. And by ensuring that Papuans will have a regional megaphone, the MSG has made it harder for Jakarta to ignore the issue. That should make President Jokowi happy. ▲
Australia, China sign free trade agreement. Australia and China officially signed a free trade agreement on June 17 following 10 years of negotiations. The deal now heads to both countries’ legislatures for approval. The agreement commits China, Australia’s largest export market, to eliminate tariffs on more than 85 percent of goods imported from Australia, increasing gradually to 95 percent. China will eliminate tariffs on Australian beef, dairy, seafood, and mineral exports. The deal also allows Chinese visitors to Australia to obtain 10-year, multiple-entry visas. Australia now has free trade agreements with China, Japan, and South Korea, three of its key export markets, as well as ASEAN, New Zealand, and the United States.

Australia alleged to have paid smugglers to return to Indonesia. Radio New Zealand and Fairfax Media on June 12 reported that Australia intercepted a boat of asylum seekers bound for New Zealand in May and paid the smugglers about $5,000 each to return to Indonesia. Asylum seekers now in Indonesia who claim to have been on the boat have corroborated the report. Prime Minister Tony Abbott refused to confirm or deny the incident, saying only that the government had employed “creative” measures and would “stop the boats by hook or by crook.” Opposition leader Bill Shorten refused to say whether the previous Labor government had also paid smugglers.

Australia to commit $720 million to AIIB. After months of negotiations with China and other nations, Australia on June 24 signed on as the 57th founding member of the Chinese-led Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) despite concerns from Washington and Tokyo. Australia pledged to provide about $720 million over five years to the AIIB, making it the sixth-largest shareholder in the regional development bank. Prime Minister Tony Abbott said Australia joined on the basis of “principle” and wanted to be a part of organizations with “transparent governance arrangements.”

Australian government closes legal loophole making offshore detention illegal. The Australian government on June 24 scrambled to close a loophole that could have rendered its offshore detention centers in Nauru and Papua New Guinea illegal. The government introduced emergency legislation to Parliament expressly enabling the use of the facilities ahead of a legal challenge to the detention program. The opposition Labor Party
Parliament passed legislation on June 23 to decrease Australia’s renewable energy target, partly due to opposition to wind farms. The bill to reduce renewable energy generation passed. Parliament passed legislation on June 23 to cut Australia’s renewable energy generation target from 41,000 to 33,000 gigawatt hours. The government said the lower target was in response to reduced consumer demand as the manufacturing sector slowed and other sources became more efficient. The deal also created a new wind farm commissioner position, which will hear and resolve complaints from residents living near wind farms. Prime Minister Tony Abbott has previously described wind farms as “visually awful” and said he wants to restrict the growth of wind energy in the country.

NEW ZEALAND

Flooding causes millions of dollars of damage on North Island. Heavy flooding hit New Zealand’s lower North Island from June 19 to 21, with the recovery expected to take months and cost hundreds of millions of dollars. Authorities evacuated more than 400 people from the hardest-hit areas and around 200 people remain cut off, with supplies being delivered by helicopter. The floods damaged thousands of acres of farmland and left many roads and bridges across the region in need of repairs.

Conservative Party leader steps down amid scandal. Colin Craig stepped down as leader of the Conservative Party on June 19 after admitting to an “inappropriate relationship” with his former press secretary. Craig indicated that he would run for reelection as head of the party he founded and personally financed. The majority of the party’s board have since resigned, leaving its future uncertain. The Conservatives won 4.1 percent of the vote in the 2014 election, failing to cross the 5 percent threshold needed to enter Parliament. The party was nonetheless seen as a possible partner for Prime Minister John Key’s National Party in the 2017 election.

New Zealand economy grows at slowest quarterly rate in two years. The New Zealand economy expanded just 0.2 percent in the first three months of 2015, the slowest quarterly rate in two years, according to data released on June 18. The growth rate was just a third of the central bank’s forecast. The sluggish growth comes on the back of a fall in global dairy prices, hurting New Zealand’s major export industry, as well as a drop in oil and gas activity due to lower global prices for those commodities. The economy grew 3.2 percent year over year, slightly short of economists’ expectations.
Auckland tribes to sue government over sale of land to developers. Maori tribes in Auckland and neighboring Waikato said June 15 that they would take the New Zealand government to court over its plans to offer land in Auckland to property developers. Housing Minister Nick Smith had planned to offer four parcels of land to developers to construct affordable housing as part of a plan to counteract Auckland’s rocketing home prices. But the tribes insisted they had a right of first refusal, which Prime Minister John Key disputed. The case will now head to New Zealand’s High Court.

Pressure mounts on government to increase refugee quota. The New Zealand government said June 19 that it may increase the country’s annual refugee quota from 750 after pressure from opposition parties and nongovernmental organizations. Immigration Minister Michael Woodhouse said the quota would be up for review, as it is every three years, in early 2016. New Zealand’s annual quota has remained at 750 since 1987. Opposition Green Party lawmaker Denise Roche has introduced a bill before Parliament to increase the quota to 1,000.

PACIFIC ISLANDS

Lawmakers arrested in Nauru during government crackdown. Nauruan authorities arrested three opposition lawmakers—Mathew Bastie, Sprent Dadwido, and Squire Jeremiah—between June 14 and 17, accusing them of leading violent protests aimed at toppling the government, in what critics have said is part of a wider crackdown on dissent. The protests related to allegations of corruption by senior members of the government, including Prime Minister Baron Waqa, and the continuing suspension of Bastie, Dadwido, Jeremiah, and two other opposition lawmakers. Dadwido and Jeremiah were refused bail on June 23. The government in recent months has also expelled foreign judges and blocked access to Facebook.

Melanesian Spearhead Group grants West Papua group observer status; makes Indonesia associate member. Leaders at a June 26 summit of the four-nation Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) summit rejected a petition by the United Liberation Movement for West Papua to join the grouping, instead granting it observer status to represent West Papuans in exile. The leaders also extended associate membership in the group to Indonesia, saying it should be represented by the governor of one of its five provinces with significant Melanesian populations. Indonesia had petitioned hard to prevent the Papuan separatist group from receiving full MSG membership like New Caledonia’s Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front.
John Momis reelected president of Bougainville. John Momis won reelection as president of Papua New Guinea’s autonomous region of Bougainville on June 8, garnering over 50 percent of the votes. His victory means Momis will lead Bougainville in organizing a referendum for potential independence, which must take place before 2019. Momis was previously Papua New Guinea’s ambassador to China and has been a member of Parliament since 1972. He has indicated that he would like to reopen the island’s large copper mine, Panguna.

Cook Islands raises prospect of UN membership. Cook Islands prime minister Henry Puna on June 9 met with his New Zealand counterpart, John Key, and indicated his country’s desire to gain a seat in the United Nations. Key ruled out the prospect, saying it would require changes to the constitutional arrangement between the two nations. The Cook Islands is in free association with New Zealand and handles its external affairs in consultation with Wellington. Cook Islands citizens are also citizens of New Zealand, entitled to the accompanying benefits. Puna said he would raise the issue again when Key visits the capital on Rarotonga in August.

Fiji prime minister says proposed flag designs no longer final. Fiji’s prime minister, Voreqe “Frank” Bainimarama, on June 30 extended public consultations on a new national flag and encouraged people to continue submitting new designs. Bainimarama had announced a week earlier that a short list of 23 designs released two weeks before was not “locked in stone.” His comment came after a public backlash against the designs, which many said were not among those submitted by the public for consideration. Many are now demanding a referendum on whether Fiji should change the flag at all. The final list will be considered by Parliament in early 2016.

Vote of no-confidence in new Vanuatu government overcomes legal hurdle. Vanuatu’s Supreme Court has overturned an effort by the country’s new Speaker of Parliament to reject a no-confidence motion filed June 15 against Prime Minister Sato Kilman, just six days after his predecessor, Joe Natuman, was ousted in a similar vote. Kilman attempted to prevent a vote by replacing the sitting speaker with an allied lawmaker who then rejected the no-confidence motion, but opposition lawmakers challenged the move in court. The court has ordered Parliament to debate the motion on July 1.
Webinar: Global Fisheries Recovery. The Ecosystem-Based Management Tools Network will organize an online seminar on July 7 to discuss new research on the world’s ocean fisheries. The webinar will focus on the current status of fisheries and the biological, social, and economic benefits that could follow from restoring those at risk. The seminar will be held from 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. For more information and to register, click here.

U.S.-Australia Speaker Series: A Global Commodities Perspective. The CSIS Pacific Partners Initiative and CSIS Energy and National Security Program will co-host the latest installment of the U.S.-Australia Speaker Series on July 8 with a discussion of global commodity trends with a special focus on China. BHP Billiton’s Dalla Valle will make remarks, followed by an expert panel with the World Bank’s Alan Townsend, CIBC World Markets Corp.’s Katherine Spector, and CSIS’s Scholl Chair in International Business Scott Miller. The event will take place from 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. in the CSIS First Floor Conference Room, 1616 Rhode Island Ave., NW. To RSVP, e-mail energy@csis.org.

Discussion on the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue. The CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies will host a discussion on July 9 analyzing the seventh U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) and examining the dialogue’s future. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Treasury Robert Dohner, Treasury senior coordinator for the S&ED Christopher Adams, and Deputy Secretary of State Susan Thornton will share their insights. The event will take place from 3:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. in the CSIS First Floor Conference Room, 1616 Rhode Island Ave., NW. To RSVP, e-mail freemanchair@csis.org.

The Fifth Annual South China Sea Conference at CSIS. The Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asia Studies will host CSIS’s fifth annual full-day South China Sea Conference on July 21. The conference will provide opportunities for in-depth discussion and analysis of U.S. and Asian policy options and feature speakers from throughout the region. The event will take place from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. in the CSIS Second Floor Conference Center, 1616 Rhode Island Ave., NW. For more information and to RSVP, click here.
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