

CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS OF DECOLONIZATION: THE INDONESIAN QUESTION AT THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL, 1947

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Abstract

Between 31 July and 25 August 1947, the United Nations Security Council debated the Dutch “police action” in Indonesia – the first major armed confrontation between the Netherlands and the Republic of Indonesia since its 1945 declaration of independence. The outbreak of hostilities prompted Australia and India to bring the issue to the UNSC, framing it as both a threat to international peace and a matter of decolonization and self-determination. Drawing primarily on Ó Tuathail’s framework of critical geopolitics, this paper analyzes the debate as a set of discursive performances and geopolitical scripts that produced and contested geopolitical meaning in the early postwar order. This framework is complemented by constructivist understandings of sovereignty and legitimacy and scholarship on anticolonial internationalism. Through the interpretive discourse analysis of the official meeting records and adopted resolutions, the study focuses on how the representatives of the Netherlands, Australia, and India articulated competing visions of world order and claims to legitimacy, revealing the 1947 debates as a founding contest over the architecture of the postwar international order and an early instance of anticolonial worldmaking. By situating these historical debates within broader patterns of North–South relations and the construction of state authority, the study highlights how early postwar discourses continue to inform contemporary understandings of global power, legitimacy, and the role of critical geopolitical narratives in shaping international relations.

Keywords: *United Nations Security Council, Indonesian Question (1947), Critical Geopolitics, Decolonization, State Sovereignty, Anti-Colonial Internationalism, Postwar International Order*

Introduction

The representative of the Netherlands notified the Secretary-General of the United Nations in a letter dated July 22, 1947, that his government, “with the utmost reluctance been compelled [sic] to authorize the Lieut. Governor General to resort to police measures of a strictly limited character” (Document S/426, 1947). The letter justified the so-called first “police action” against the Republic of Indonesia on the grounds that the Netherlands, with which the sovereignty of the territory rested, was ultimately responsible for maintaining law and order (Document S/426, 1947). However, the Dutch narrative was called into question on July 30 when the representatives of Australia and India brought the issue before the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The discussion of the Indonesian Question commenced the next day.

Although the UNSC played an integral role in the recognition of Indonesia’s independence during the years leading up to the eventual transfer of sovereignty in 1949, the scope of this study is limited to the period between July 31 and August 25, 1947: the period from the placing of the Indonesian Question on the agenda until the resolution deciding on the establishment of the Committee of Good Offices, representing the formal institutionalization of mediation and international oversight (S/RES/30., 1947; S/RES/31., 1947). Employing interpretive discourse analysis, the aforementioned period will be examined through the Security Council meeting records (171st–195th meetings) and Resolutions 27, 30, and 31 (1947). The main argument of this paper is that the raising and subsequent discussion of the Indonesian Question not only challenged the Dutch military action attempting to restore colonial authority but also exposed and contested key assumptions of the post-Second World War geopolitical order.

For the purposes of this study, geopolitics will be understood as re-conceptualized by Gearóid Ó Tuathail in his approach of critical geopolitics. Accordingly, geopolitics will be interpreted as a highly ideological and political “discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft ‘spatialize’ international politics in such a way as to represent it as a ‘world’ characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas” (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 192). As discourses are constantly being modified by human practice (p. 193), the UNSC will be conceptualized as a stage where competing geopolitical scripts were performed over the right to speak sovereignly about geography, space, and territory. Geography, as articulated by Ó Tuathail, “was an active writing of the earth by an expanding, centralizing imperial state” (Ó Tuathail, 1996, p. 1), in this case the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Consequently, an understanding of space based on the principles of empire and state sovereignty was imposed onto the Indonesian archipelago. Complementing this framework, the constructivist understanding of sovereignty and legitimacy – as social and political constructs produced through recognition and practice – highlights

how these debates reflected a genuine ambiguity surrounding the Council's early authority (Hurd, 2007; Biersteker & Weber, 1996). As a colonial dispute was framed as a threat to international peace and security – without clear precedent or established Charter applicability – the Indonesian Question became open to discursive contestation.

Based on the premise that the UNSC debates became a contest between different ways of envisioning the world, the principal objective of this paper is to analyze the discursive strategies “performed” by the respective states as part of their contestation over spatial legitimacy. The analysis identifies “discursive strategies” as recurring patterns of framing through which representatives categorize spaces, actors, and events to advance claims to legitimacy, and “geopolitical scripts” as the broader, integrated narratives that organize these strategies into a coherent vision of world order. The study will attempt to contrast the Dutch narrative with the Australian and Indian counter-narratives over the spatial nature of the conflict: was Indonesia an internal Dutch domain, a matter of international concern, or a nascent sovereign state? By treating these debates as discursive performances rather than institutional procedures, the paper challenges conventional – political, diplomatic, and legal – accounts of the Indonesian Question (Foray, 2021; Taylor, 1960), while also contributing to broader scholarly debates on anticolonial internationalism and the normative contestation of the postwar order (Getachew, 2019; Mazower, 2009). It will be further argued that the UNSC meetings not only revolved around Indonesia, but also around the structural tension within postwar geopolitics itself.

Historical Context

After the unconditional surrender of the Japanese Empire on August 15, 1945, a political vacuum emerged in the Indonesian archipelago, or in the Netherlands East Indies, as the territory was known as a Dutch colony at the time. Taking advantage of the opportunity, nationalist leaders Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta proclaimed the independence of the Republic of Indonesia two days later (Ricklefs, 2001). The proclamation simultaneously marked the beginning of the Indonesian National Revolution (1945–1949). However, the Netherlands was not in a position to militarily challenge the nascent Republic after the Second World War, hence the Lord Louis Mountbatten-led South East Asia Command (SEAC) assumed responsibility for accepting the Japanese surrender, releasing the prisoners of war, and maintaining law and order until the arrival of the Dutch administration (McMillan, 2005). The transfer of authority began in November, and by July 15, 1946, the Netherlands Indies Civil Administration re-established the Dutch government's authority over the archipelago with the exception of the Republican-controlled islands of Java, Sumatra, and Madura (Steiner, 1947).

After months of sporadic armed conflicts and failed negotiations, an agreement seemed to take shape in the fall of 1946. The Linggadjati Agreement was accepted by the Netherlands Commission-General and the Delegation of the Republic of Indonesia on November 15, 1946; and it was subsequently ratified on March 25, 1947 (Linggadjati Agreement, 1947). The Agreement recognized the Republic's de facto authority over the islands of Java, Sumatra, and Madura (Article I). Furthermore, it called for the "rapid formation of a sovereign democratic State on a federal basis" (Article II), comprised of three territories, covering the "entire territory of the Netherlands East Indies": the Republic of Indonesia, Borneo, and the Great East (Article III–IV). The federal state, referred to as the United States of Indonesia, was envisaged as being part of the Netherlands Indonesian Union headed by the Dutch monarch (Article VI). Finally, it was decided that any dispute that could not be resolved through joint consultation should be settled by arbitration (Article XVII). Despite the successful ratification of the agreement, different interpretations of the text and accusations of violating the conditions by both parties eventually led to the escalation of the conflict, culminating in a coordinated military offensive on July 20, 1947, known as the first "police action".

The outbreak of the hostilities transformed the conflict from a localized colonial struggle into an international crisis, at least as characterized by Australia and India when referring the question to the UNSC. It is important to note that when the Indonesian Question was brought before the Council, its non-permanent members only included Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Colombia, Poland, and Syria. One of the first decisions taken by the member states was to invite – although without voting rights – the Netherlands and India in line with Articles 31 and 32 of the Charter, which allowed UN member and even non-member states to participate in the discussions if they were "specially affected" or a "party to a dispute" under consideration (UN Charter, 1945). As can be seen, the Republic of Indonesia was not among the invited parties when the 171st session commenced on July 31. This reflects the initial uncertainty concerning the Republic's status in international law, in addition to the Security Council's hesitancy to become involved with colonial matters. The Dutch representative, Eelco van Kleffens, consistently maintained throughout the meetings – as will be examined in the next section – that the UN Charter was not applicable in the case of the Indonesian Question, and even if it was, the Council had no jurisdiction.

The Colonial Geopolitical Script: The Netherlands

Following the decision that the Netherlands and India could participate in the UNSC meetings, the Australian representative promptly suggested sending an invitation to the "Government of Indonesia" as well (S/PV.171., 1947). After taking his seat at the Council, Eelco van Kleffens sought to speak immediately, since he

regarded the possible invitation of the Indonesian representative to “prejudge the whole question” (p. 1619), immediately shedding light on the primary objective of the Dutch narrative: maintaining the geopolitical status quo of colonial authority by denying the Republic’s sovereignty and even its subjectivity as an international political actor. In the following paragraphs, the Netherlands’ reasoning during the UNSC meetings – termed here the Colonial Geopolitical Script – will be examined not in a chronological order of the speeches given by van Kleffens, but according to – highly interrelated and at times overlapping – thematic discursive strategies aiming at delegitimizing the Republic’s case on multiple fronts and levels.

Throughout the proceedings, one of the most foundational Dutch discursive strategies was the ontological denial of Indonesian sovereignty. Van Kleffens argued that the Republic of Indonesia was not and never had been a sovereign and independent state (pp. 1619–1620). In accordance with the Linggadjati Agreement, the Republican Government was only granted *de facto* authority, while *de jure* sovereignty still rested with the Kingdom of the Netherlands (S/PV.181., 1947). As part of the discursive strategy, the claim of Indonesian statehood was denied as well. Referring to the Linggadjati Agreement once again, van Kleffens stated that the only sovereign state would be the future United States of Indonesia, thus the Republic was only a “political entity”, a “state-to-be”, a “constituent element” destined to be ultimately affiliated with East Indonesia and Borneo, becoming part of said federation (S/PV.171., 1947; S/PV.192., 1947). Its status and nature “as a state” was compared to that of New York or Utah, making it a sub-national or sub-state unit (S/PV.171., 1947). This spatial analogy functioned to strip Indonesia of its territorial subjectivity, one of the principal criteria – cited by van Kleffens – for recognition as a sovereign state in international law. Besides a well-defined territory in which authority was exercised, the other requirement included real governmental authority, a population not subject to another state, and *de jure* recognition (S/PV.181., 1947, pp. 1921–1922). According to the Dutch narrative, the Republic did not meet any of the requirements mentioned. The Indonesian Government was characterized as remnants of Japanese ideology, Japanese methods, and Japanese indoctrination (S/PV.185., 1947, p. 2009). Portraying the Republic as a Japanese creation questioned its legitimacy and the claim that it was the manifestation of the population’s right and will to self-determination. Additionally, in certain areas of Java and Sumatra – i.e. the well-defined territory only acknowledged in the Linggadjati Agreement – the population did not recognize the authority of the government and did not consider themselves as “wholly and exclusively” citizens of the Republic as they were aware of their ties with the Kingdom of the Netherlands (S/PV.181., 1947). Furthermore, the Government also lacked recognition by the international community necessary to constitute a sovereign and independent state (S/PV.181., 1947). As shown, the Dutch attempted to deny the geopolitical subjectivity of the Republic of Indonesia by excluding it from the community of sovereign states. In constructivist

terms, sovereignty here was not being treated as a legal fact but as a social construct to be withheld (Biersteker & Weber, 1996; Hurd, 2007).

By excluding the Republic from the international system, van Kleffens could claim that the Security Council had no jurisdiction over the Indonesian Question. The first step of the legal-procedural discursive strategy was to deny the applicability of the Charter to “what is now happening in Java and Sumatra” (S/PV.171., 1947, p. 1645). Building directly upon the ontological denial of sovereignty, the Dutch argued that the UN Charter and its principle of “sovereign equality” (Article 2(1)) were intended to “operate between sovereign States” (p. 1645). On similar grounds, the invitation of the Indonesian delegation was objected as only sovereign and independent states could participate in accordance with Article 32. When a vote was taken in favor of inviting the Republic’s representative on August 12, van Kleffens similarly objected to the acceptance of Sutan Sjahrir – the head of the Republican delegation – as an ambassador since only states recognized in international law had ambassadors (S/PV.181., 1947).

The second step was to characterize the conflict as an internal matter, claiming that it was “essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of the Netherlands” under Article 2, paragraph 7 of the Charter (S/PV.171., 1947, p. 1645). Finally, framing the military offensive as a domestic matter was meant to restrict the geographical impact of the violence. By asking the rhetorical question “In what countries outside the Netherlands’ territory are there any signs of danger to peace caused by this action?” (p. 1645), van Kleffens directly challenged the Australian assertion that the conflict constituted a breach of the peace under Article 39. As will be shown, Australia and India placed great emphasis on the international implications of the conflict. Additionally, even the mere fact that the question was discussed at the United Nations Security Council lent it the appearance of an international issue. Consequently, by insisting that the Council was operating outside its “limitations” (p. 1646), the Netherlands not only tried to delegitimize the entire proceeding but also intended to spatially re-map its “police action” from an international matter to a strictly domestic conflict located within the Netherlands’ sovereign space.

Strongly connected to the mapping of the conflict, the third discursive strategy was the spatial fragmentation of the Indonesian archipelago’s political geography. As both the Netherlands and the Republic of Indonesia formed claims to the entire territory of the Netherlands East Indies, this strategy primarily served to undermine the unitary notion of Indonesian state- and nationhood. While the Dutch intended to restore their former authority, it is interesting to note that they referred to the territory as Indonesia, and not as Netherlands East Indies. This was most likely due to the realization that a full-scale colonial war was contradictory to the new postwar realities, particularly to the spirit of the UN Charter. Nevertheless, the Dutch definition of Indonesia still extended to the whole archipelago, “reaching from Sumatra in the west to New Guinea in the east” (S/PV.171., 1947, p. 1619). In light of this,

van Kleffens referred to the Republic of Indonesia as an expansionist “programme” (S/PV.181., 1947, p. 1922), emphasizing the misleading nature of its name, since geographically it only comprised the islands of Java and Sumatra and was never intended to comprise more than that (S/PV.171., 1947).

As part of the discursive strategy, the Netherlands elevated the status of the two other Dutch-created non-sovereign entities making up Indonesia – the States of East Indonesia and Borneo – claiming that these were “on exactly the same level as the Republic of Indonesia” (S/PV.181., 1947, p. 1942). Further strengthening their justification, the Netherlands claimed that these “sister States” approved the military action and had “asked us more than once to take such action earlier” (S/PV.171., 1947, p. 1640). This rhetoric move prompted the Indonesian delegation to characterize East Indonesia and Borneo as “puppet states” (S/PV.184., 1947, p. 2000) and thereby to object to granting them invitation to the Council meetings as was requested by van Kleffens claiming that the matter affected them very deeply (S/PV.181., 1947). Consequently, the police action was framed as a defensive endeavor aiming at protecting the freedom and democratic system of the two other states against the expansionist tendencies of the Republic of Indonesia, which was portrayed as harboring ambitions to rule over the entire archipelago (S/PV.181., 1947). By fragmenting the territory’s political geography, the Netherlands attempted to weaken the Republican claim of political and national unity based on self-determination and limited its – only de facto – authority to Java, Madura, and Sumatra.

The signing of the Linggadjati Agreement was a double-edged sword. Although Article I restricted the territory of the Republic of Indonesia, it also recognized its de facto authority over the three aforementioned islands, thus inherently weakening the Dutch claims of domestic jurisdiction and absolute sovereignty. This fact was referenced on multiple occasions by the delegations questioning the true motives behind the Dutch “police action”. Furthermore, the official registration of the Agreement with the Security Council was interpreted by certain delegations as meaning that it was – in effect – an “international agreement” between two states. Consequently, some countries, such as Egypt and Syria, even concluded treaties of friendship with the Republic of Indonesia. Reflecting upon these matters, the Dutch representative stated that the Security Council was merely informed about the agreement, and that there was no request at all to officially register it (S/PV.171., 1947). Moreover, to justify the ongoing military efforts, the van Kleffens-led delegation claimed that the Republican Government was “either not prepared or not able to implement that Agreement”, citing specific violations such as failing to observe the truce, engaging in the “loathsome practice” of keeping hostages, blockading territories held by the Dutch troops, and acting like a sovereign state by entering into “direct agreements with other States” (p. 1640). Although Article XVII contained an arbitration clause, van Kleffens asserted that it was not applicable since most of

these questions were not regulated in the Linggadjati Agreement, thus leaving no other option but to resort to force in order to restore order and legality (p. 1642).

Another strategy aimed at legitimizing the use of force was the reframing of the conflict as “police measures of a strictly limited character”. Even though it was admittedly a military conflict, it did not fall within the authority of the Security Council. As van Kleffens phrased it: “This is clearly not war... we are compelled to do so by circumstances and much against our will. This is not war. The best words we have been able to find for it...were ‘police action’” (p. 1644). The assertion not only meant to position the Netherlands as a reluctant actor in the matter – preempting accusations of imperial aggression – but it also aimed at avoiding the implications of Article 39 (breaches of the peace) invoked by Australia. Trying to minimize its scale and scope, the operations were portrayed as a strictly internal matter under Dutch domestic jurisdiction, where the sovereign power “responsible for the maintenance of law and order” was forced to intervene in order to restore the peace disturbed by the Republican forces. In addition, van Kleffens emphasized that his government enjoyed the full backing of all the parties and trade unions of the Netherlands, not to mention the governments and population of East Indonesian and Borneo (S/PV.171., 1947).

By portraying themselves as “the guardians of their security and true liberty” (p. 1644), the Dutch delegation also relied on a humanitarian and civilizational narrative, drawing a very sharp contrast with the disorder and lawlessness of the Republic. The Republic was characterized as fundamentally unstable, lacking authority (“it was not obeyed”), and run by an “oppressive government” of “totalitarian character” that rested on the “support of armed people whom it cannot control” (S/PV.171., 1947; S/PV.185., 1947). This narrative claimed that the “honest, common agricultural folk” who were constantly terrorized by “undisciplined troops and lawless elements”, actually welcomed the Dutch troops restoring order and repairing infrastructure (S/PV.171., 1947; S/PV.192., 1947). By claiming that it was actually the Republic who hindered the realization of freedom, van Kleffens positioned the Netherlands as liberators, rejecting accusations of attempting to re-establish colonialism. The military action was thus framed as a necessity, a consequence of the chaos and anarchy under the dictatorial Republican Government intent on subjugating the entire archipelago. The narrative also challenged the effective governance condition of functional statehood advanced by both India and Australia. The Dutch representative insisted that they wanted to act with the Indonesians as “partners”, since the time was “past for servants” (S/PV.171., 1947, pp. 1644–1645); and what they truly advocated for was freedom, self-government, and the establishment of the democratic and sovereign United States of Indonesia (S/PV.192., 1947).

Instrumentalizing the Linggadjati Agreement once again, van Kleffens asserted that the Netherlands complied in every respect with Chapter XI,¹ particularly Article 73 of the UN Charter by promoting the well-being of the inhabitants and helping

them progress toward self-government (S/PV.185., 1947). On the other hand, the Security Council was acting well beyond the bounds of the Charter. As part of the discursive strategy of shifting responsibility, the UNSC was warned that intervention was counterproductive: if the Council “embarrasses our honest constructive efforts,” the responsibility for the failure would be the “Council’s, not ours” (S/PV.171., 1947, p. 1647). Furthermore, if the Dutch troops were withdrawn, “terrible acts of retaliation” would follow (S/PV.173., 1947, p. 1705). This framing attempted to shift moral responsibility onto the Security Council for any prolonged instability if they chose to interfere with the Dutch domestic jurisdiction. Moreover, van Kleffens called attention to the possible ramifications of the Council’s interference: a precedence could be established where “a faction in any country claims to be a Government and opposes the sovereign or paramount Power” (S/PV.192., 1947, p. 2144). Based on the discursive strategies outlined above, it can be stated that the Netherlands sought to stabilize a spatial and legal imaginary that could preserve its colonial authority without appearing to violate the principles of international peace, self-determination, and collective security. Van Kleffens was not merely defending Dutch interests but articulating a vision of world order that reflected the continued centrality of empire – and its hierarchical spatial logic – within the emerging United Nations system (Mazower, 2009). However, as will be shown, Australia and India attempted to perform a re-territorialization of Indonesia as an international subject, challenging the Dutch colonial geopolitical script and the hierarchical international system with it.

The Regional Security Counter-Script: Australia

Australian discursive strategies during the UN Security Council meetings were designed to counter Dutch attempts at “internalizing” the conflict. While the Netherlands sought to frame the situation as a domestic policing matter, Australia’s strategy was aimed at internationalizing the conflict and recognizing the statehood of the Republic of Indonesia. This approach was clearly detectable from the beginning of the proceedings. Colonel William R. Hodgson claimed in a letter sent to the Secretary-General on July 30 that the “hostilities in Java and Sumatra” constituted a breach of the peace under Article 39 of Chapter VII,² and urged the Security Council to restore international peace and security (Document S/449, 1947). Article 39 grants the authority to take certain measures if the “existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression” was determined (UN Charter, 1945). By explicitly invoking Chapter VII of the Charter and emphasizing that this was the first case brought under Article 39, Australia framed the Indonesian conflict as a foundational test of the UN’s authority in the postwar international order (S/PV.171., 1947). Besides its precedent-value, the application of Chapter VII was also fundamental due to the fact that Article 2(7), which grants absolute domestic

jurisdiction to states, also contains the clause that “this principle shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under Chapter VII” (UN Charter, 1945). Consequently, Hodgson argued that once a matter was brought under Chapter VII, it “follows automatically” that the issue was outside the sphere of domestic jurisdiction (S/PV.195., 1947, pp. 2216–2217). The Australian delegation thereby attempted to position the Security Council not as a passive observer but as an institution with both the competence and the obligation to act, even if it meant extending international oversight over spaces previously shielded by the principle of classical Westphalian sovereignty. Both the question of the Council's competence and the scope of its obligations were thus reframed: what the Dutch characterized as illegitimate interference, the Australians regarded as an institutional obligation.

Nonetheless, the Australian appeal could only achieve its aim if the Dutch police action was considered an actual threat to international peace and security. Accordingly, instead of a localized domestic conflict, the intervention was characterized as “large-scale military operations” and even as “warfare”, which “in international law, is armed conflict between two States” (S/PV.171., 1947, p. 1623). As Article 39 was invoked for the first time, there was no clear precedent as to what constituted a breach of the peace. In order to substantiate the scale and scope of the conflict, Hodgson referenced the coordinated use of naval units, aircraft and tanks, the issuance of regular military communiqués, the wide extent of the fighting between organized forces, and the substantial number of casualties (S/PV.171., 1947). In addition, for the term “warfare” – as understood in international law – to apply, the Australian representative outlined a more flexible, functional understanding of statehood. Hodgson did not question van Kleffens’ remark that UN membership was based on the equality of sovereign states; he argued instead that there was no clause in the Charter prohibiting the Council from acting in a dispute between two states (S/PV.171., 1947). Therefore, although the Republic of Indonesia did not possess *de jure* sovereignty, it still constituted a state under international law. The functional redefinition of statehood – resting on effective governance, international recognition, and organized armed capacity – was a direct counter to the Dutch ontological denial examined above. This recognition was essential to Australia’s Chapter VII strategy: only by treating Indonesia as a state could the conflict be framed as interstate warfare and thus as a breach of international peace.

By characterizing the conflict as hostilities between the armed forces of the Netherlands and the Republic, Australia elevated the latter to an equal footing in the matter. On the other hand, the equal status of the States of East Indonesia and Borneo was refuted on the grounds that neither had received any form of recognition (S/PV.181., 1947). As one of the most important pillars of statehood in the Australian discursive strategy, it was contended that the Republic of Indonesia had received “very wide international recognition” (S/PV.171., 1947, p. 1627). Hodgson even drew a parallel with Australia and New Zealand. Although both countries were

parts of the British Commonwealth, their independence had received sufficient recognition to be founding members of the United Nations (S/PV.181., 1947). To further strengthen his argument, Colonel Hodgson referenced the Netherlands-Indonesian Draft Agreement and the Linggadjati Agreement as both were negotiated and signed by the Republican Government, the latter even recognizing the government's de facto authority (S/PV.171., 1947). The invocation of the Linggadjati Agreement was significant for another reason as well: by highlighting Article XVII's arbitration clause – requiring the involvement of the President of the International Court of Justice – Australia underscored that only states could be parties to such procedures (S/PV.171., 1947). Lastly, in order to accentuate the Indonesian Republic's international recognition, Hodgson noted that the Republic had received de facto recognition from – besides the Netherlands – the United Kingdom, the United States, India, Australia, and the members of the Arab League, and diplomatic recognition from Iraq, Egypt, and Syria. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the latter two even conducted treaties of friendship with the Republican Government (S/PV.171., 1947). By listing each instance of de facto recognition, Hodgson was constructing sovereignty not as a binary legal status to be granted or withheld by the Netherlands, but as a social reality already produced through international practice (Biersteker & Weber, 1996).

Finally, to highlight the international implications of the armed conflict between the two states, the Australian delegation constructed a regional, geographical imaginary in which Indonesia was reframed from a distant overseas territory of the Netherlands to a proximate and consequential geopolitical space. As Colonel Hodgson put it: "Not only is Indonesia adjacent to our territory, but we are bound by the closest possible economic and commercial ties with this important area" (p. 1622). Furthermore, according to the Australian narrative, the Indonesian Question affected the well-being and stability of "the whole of the South-west Pacific and South-east Asia" (pp. 1622–1623). By framing the hostilities as a threat to the entire region, Australia moved the geographical scale of the conflict from a domestic Dutch matter to a regional security crisis that "especially affected" Australian national interests (p. 1622), thus legitimizing its intervention in the matter. Since the Dutch operations became situated within a shared regional space, the stability of which was a collective concern, Australia regarded the issue as falling within the authority of the Security Council. Accordingly, Australia submitted a resolution to the UNSC calling for an immediate cease-fire and the settlement of the dispute by arbitration in accordance with Article XVII of the Linggadjati Agreement (S/RES/27, 1947). As the discussion of the resolution was drawn out by procedural battles, Hodgson also called attention to the fact that the matter on the agenda was not a purely legal question, and that it had "grave political implications", even affecting world security (S/PV.195., 1947). Through these discursive strategies, Australia positioned itself as an intermediary actor and a regional middle power, speaking from a position that

was neither imperial (Netherlands) nor postcolonial (India), calling for a collective security system and a cautious reconfiguration of geopolitical space. In this sense, the Australian counter-script did not merely respond to Dutch framing but actively produced an alternative spatial order in which Indonesia was a regional security matter, UNSC jurisdiction was legitimate, and international oversight was a collective responsibility (Ó Tuathail, 1996).

The Anti-Colonial Counter-Script: India

As seen in the case of Australia, India's intervention also began with a letter dated July 30, referring the Indonesian Question to the UN Secretary-General. More specifically, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wished to call the Security Council's attention to the situation in Indonesia, which, in his opinion, endangered "the maintenance of international peace and security" (Document S/447, 1947). Unlike Article 39 invoked by the Australian delegation, Articles 34 and 35(1) of Chapter VI, referenced by Nehru, only authorized the Council to investigate a dispute and to determine whether a threat to international peace and security existed (UN Charter, 1945). Nevertheless, the Indian representative clarified the difference at the first possible occasion: not being a Security Council member, India did not feel entitled to invoke more urgent provisions; however, the delegation fully supported the application of Chapter VII (S/PV.171., 1947). As can be seen from the letter, India also intended to re-spatialize the conflict from a strictly domestic to a regional, international matter. Samar Sen and Padmanabha Pillai, the Indian representatives, consistently rejected the Dutch attempt to frame the conflict as an internal, localized question. Yet, where the Australian counter-script was grounded in regional security and institutional-legal argument, the Indian delegation posed a direct challenge to the premises of the colonial international order itself.

Through the discursive strategy of geopolitical rescaling, Indonesia was portrayed as the "heart of Southeast Asia" (S/PV.192., 1947, p. 2157), reframing the conflict as a threat to the entire region, affecting the "peace and security of the whole of South-east Asia" (S/PV.171., 1947, p. 1628). Moreover, Southeast Asia was characterized as "one of the danger spots" of the world, calling attention to the fact that the Dutch operations could and should not be viewed as an isolated incident (S/PV.192., 1947, p. 2157). In this regard, Pillai found it rather regrettable that France, a nation contributing so much to the concept of liberty, would help to "retard that human liberty in Southeast Asia" (S/PV.195., 1947, p. 2221). Besides alluding to the Indochinese War, the Indian representative specifically referred to France's veto on a resolution amendment calling for the establishment of a commission made up of Security Council member states to oversee the implementation of the August 1 cease-fire order (S/PV.195., 1947).

By openly criticizing the French veto, Pillai attempted to expose the geopolitical alignment of the “group of colonial exploiters” (S/PV.192., 1947, p. 2154), arguing that colonial powers felt it was their “duty to support each other” (S/PV.195., 1947, p. 2020). India repeatedly accused colonial powers of using procedural maneuvers – calls for advisory opinions, jurisdictional debates, and consular inquiries – in order to ensure that “policies of imperialism” would not be raised before the Council, and to delay action while preparing for renewed military offensives (S/PV.192., 1947, p. 2153). Furthermore, Pillai explicitly attacked the Dutch discursive techniques, labelling them as “stock arguments in the repertoire of the colonial apologist” (p. 2154). The Indian representative identified and deconstructed familiar colonial tropes: natives were unfit or unable to govern themselves and to enforce law and order; they possessed undemocratic, imperialistic and expansionist tendencies; and hostility towards all foreigners as evidenced by testimonies of foreign missionaries (S/PV.192., 1947). With this counter-hegemonic act, India not only critiqued specific Dutch claims but also the entire repertoire of discursive structures through which colonial geopolitical scripts operated. By revealing the inherently imperialistic nature of the postwar geopolitical order itself, Pillai demonstrated that the prevalent assumptions of the era were not neutral, but highly strategic, political, and ideological.

Directly challenging colonial spatial hierarchies, India repeatedly highlighted the racial, continental, and civilizational dimensions of the debate. Pillai declared that “no European country... had any business to use its army in Asia” and the presence of foreign troops on “Asian soil” was framed as an “outrage against Asian sentiment” (pp. 2153–2154). Closely connected, India’s discursive strategy of constructing Asia as a unified geopolitical subject contested the imperial geopolitical imagination, or as phrased by Ó Tuathail (1996), the “understanding of space based on the principles of empire and state sovereignty” (p. 5). The Indian representatives frequently spoke for the East and for Asia, remarking that events in Indonesia were being watched “with anxious eyes by the rest of Asia” (S/PV.192., 1947, p. 2157). At the 192nd meeting Pillai distinguished the West and the East as separate geopolitical subjects. The West was characterized as sophisticated and democratic, while at the same time hypocritical. Two world wars were fought – in which Asian nations had also participated – against “aggression and lust for domination”, and in the name of democracy and self-determination; yet colonialism and colonial wars were still “permitted” (p. 2153). As can be seen, Pillai drew parallels, on the one hand, between colonialism and fascism, and on the other, between democracy, self-determination and the Asian states’ struggle for autonomy and independence. In this framework, the Netherlands was identified as the “aggressor Government” (S/PV.195., 1947, p. 2219) and the Republic of Indonesia was the one fighting – maybe “naively” – for “European values” just as the Allies had done in the two world wars.

This Indian discursive strategy was further strengthened by historical analogies, linking Indonesia to earlier failures of collective security. References to Japan's aggression in China and Italy's invasion of Ethiopia served to warn the Council of the dangers of tolerating colonial violence under legal pretexts and thereby undermining the credibility of the postwar order (p. 2221). The Indian delegation remarked that the "people of Asia are looking to the United Nations to help them in the onward path of independence and democracy, to reconcile race with race, continent with continent, and to pave the way for the one world for which we are all longing" (S/PV.192., 1947, p. 2157). In the Indian narrative, the Security Council was the only body in the world competent to deal with the Indonesian Question. Samar Sen went as far as referring to the Council as the "last hope of humanity for peace and security" (S/PV.171., 1947, p. 1621). Like Hodgson before him, the Indian representative highlighted that the international organ's authority was conditional upon its willingness to act. However, beyond the institutional obligations stressed by Australia, Sen also advanced a moral argument, putting pressure on the Council members to uphold the UN's founding principles. Furthermore, in order to meet its "high moral and political responsibilities", the UNSC – Pillai argued – should not be a strictly procedural forum because the issues involved – "racial, national, and colonial conflicts" – affected the very foundations of modern society (S/PV.195., 1947, p. 2219-2221). Here, proceduralism itself was framed as a strategic geopolitical practice.

One such "hair-splitting legalism" (p. 2220) was the Netherlands' reliance on legal definitions of sovereignty and statehood. In this regard, India invoked arguments quite similar to those of the Australian delegation. Both Sen and Pillai stressed that the Netherlands itself recognized the Republic's *de facto* authority over Java, Sumatra, and Madura under the Linggadjati Agreement, and that this authority had been internationally acknowledged. *De facto* governance and practiced functional sovereignty were presented as evidence of real statehood. Furthermore, unlike Australia, India even referenced internationally recognized law authorities (Birkenhead and Hall) to argue that "full sovereignty" was not a prerequisite for statehood (S/PV.171., 1947, p. 1628), grounding the functional sovereignty argument in recognized legal doctrine. It is important to note that the Indian representatives did not reject international law itself, but its selective application by the Netherlands to serve their geopolitical interests. The Indian narrative thus positioned the Republican Government as a legitimate international actor, constituting a state for the "purposes of Chapter VII" (S/PV.181., 1947, p. 1924) – a state in transition from colonial rule to independence, and a state entitled to international protection. Repudiating the euphemistic epithet of "police action", the conflict was referred to as a "senseless" colonial war multiple times by both Sen and Pillai, and as an asymmetric war no less: one side using modern arms and weapons, while the other fought with "bamboo poles" and their hands (S/PV.178., 1947, p. 1846). According to the Indian

representative, the Dutch operations were not aimed at restoring peace and order, but at occupying further strategic areas in Java and Sumatra, just as they had done in East Indonesia and Borneo. As for the Dutch claim concerning the support of the two states, Sen – presumably sarcastically – added that “wherever Dutch forces penetrate, the population comes over” to their side (S/PV.173., 1947, p. 1707).

For the reasons outlined above, the Indian delegation urged the Security Council – in an age in which there was no “moral basis for the ownership of colonies” anymore – not to tolerate a full-scale colonial war (S/PV.192., 1947, p. 2154). Instead of debating the competence of the UNSC, Pillai posed the rhetorical question “whether it is morally defensible to use force for the continued enslavement and political subjection of human beings” (S/PV.195., 1947, p. 2220). The Indian delegation warned the Security Council that inactivity would defeat the objectives of the UN; it would diminish its prestige and authority, and ultimately lead to the end of the Organization (S/PV.192., 1947). Similarly to the “last hope of humanity” argument, the warning was meant to call attention to the fact that the UN’s authority rested on the collective belief that it would act in accordance with its founding purposes – and inaction would erode that belief (Hurd, 2007). Taken together, the Indian discursive strategies formed a powerful postcolonial counter-geopolitical script, challenging imperial authority and calling for the reconstitution of global political space in the age of decolonization. The Indian performance at the UNSC represented an early instance of what Getachew (2019) termed anticolonial worldmaking: the use of international institutional language to contest the normative foundations of the existing order and to produce, through discursive practice, an alternative vision of sovereign equality.

Conclusion

Drawing primarily on Ó Tuathail’s framework of critical geopolitics, this paper analyzed the UNSC debates on the Indonesian Question as a set of discursive performances and geopolitical scripts that produced and contested geopolitical meaning in the early postwar order. Through interpretive discourse analysis of the official meeting records and adopted resolutions, the study focused on how the representatives of the Netherlands, Australia, and India articulated competing visions of world order and claims to legitimacy. The Netherlands, by fragmenting the political geography of the archipelago, denying Indonesian sovereignty, excluding the applicability of the UN Charter, instrumentalizing the Linggadjati Agreement, and reframing military violence as internal “police action”, sought to stabilize a spatial and legal imaginary through which colonial authority could be preserved in a hierarchical international system without appearing to violate the principles of international peace, self-determination, and collective security. The Dutch discursive strategies ultimately revealed the structural logic of colonial geopolitics itself: the

attempt to maintain a hierarchical world order grounded in the principles of Westphalian sovereignty. As part of the performance, van Kleffens instrumentalized international law to shield imperial authority – a vision that was, as Mazower (2009) has shown, embedded in the very architecture of the UN's founding.

On the other hand, Australia and India – through distinct but complementary counter-scripts – attempted to perform a re-territorialization of Indonesia as an international subject, challenging the Dutch colonial geopolitical script. Australia's performance was geopolitically situated and strategic, positioning itself as a regional middle power seeking to shape the emerging postwar order in Southeast Asia by emphasizing its proximity and security concerns. While Australia's discursive strategies were primarily based on considerations of regional security and institutional-legal internationalism, India advanced an Asian postcolonial and moral counter-geopolitical script challenging imperial authority and calling for the reconstitution of global political space and international order in the age of decolonization. The distinction between the two counter-scripts is analytically significant: Australia sought to expand the UNSC's jurisdictional reach within the existing framework of international law, while India sought to contest the normative foundations of that framework itself.

The three scripts were not simply competing diplomatic positions, but competing visions of what sovereignty meant. In constructivist terms, the UNSC debates were a site of sovereignty construction: the international subjectivity of the Republic of Indonesia was not a given that the Council recognized or denied, but an object actively produced and contested through the discursive performances of all three delegations (Biersteker & Weber, 1996). The 1947 UNSC debates on the Indonesian Question were, in this sense, a founding contest over the architecture of the postwar order: a moment in which the imperial assumptions built into the United Nations system were openly challenged by actors who used the institution's own language against it, performing an alternative vision of sovereign equality – a project of worldmaking.

Notes

¹ Declaration Regarding Non-Self-Governing Territories.

² Chapter VI of the UN Charter invoked by India concerns the pacific settlement of disputes and authorizes investigation and recommendation, whereas Chapter VII allows the Security Council to determine threats to peace and adopt binding enforcement measures, thereby limiting claims of domestic jurisdiction under Article 2(7).

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