



The Melanesian Way in South Pacific Regional Diplomacy: Implications for the Papua Issue

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the tension between Melanesian solidarity and state sovereignty shapes the Melanesian Spearhead Group's (MSG) diplomacy on the Papua issue. Drawing on a qualitative research design, the analysis is based on interpretive document analysis of MSG leaders' communiqués, ministerial statements, and official declarations issued between 2010 and 2022. The study is informed by constructivism and norm contestation theory to assess how competing norms are articulated and managed in regional practice. It offers a novel contribution to International Relations by reconceptualizing the Papua issue in MSG diplomacy not as a problem to be resolved, but as a condition sustained through ongoing norm contestation. The findings reveal that Melanesian solidarity legitimizes regional attention while state sovereignty constrains collective action, producing a *dynamic interplay* rather than *convergence*. By demonstrating that ambiguity, selective activation, and discursive balancing function as stabilizing mechanisms, this article challenges conventional assumptions that unresolved issues reflect institutional weakness and instead shows how they can sustain regional cohesion.

KEYWORDS

Melanesian Spearhead Group; Diplomacy; Norm Contestation; Papua; Sovereignty.

INTRODUCTION

Regional diplomacy in the South Pacific has long been shaped not only by material interests and strategic calculations, but also by normative commitments rooted in shared identity, historical experience, and postcolonial consciousness. Among Melanesian states, these commitments are frequently articulated through the notion of the Melanesian Way, a normative framework emphasizing solidarity, consensus, communal obligation, and shared cultural-political identity among Melanesian peoples. Since the establishment of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) in 1988, this normative orientation has been institutionalized within a regional diplomatic forum that explicitly frames cooperation in terms of Melanesian unity and collective political voice ([May, 2011](#)). However, the operationalization of Melanesian solidarity in regional diplomacy has increasingly intersected and at times collided with the foundational principle of state sovereignty that underpins the modern international system.

This normative tension becomes particularly visible in the diplomatic contestation surrounding Papua¹. While Papua constitutes an integral part of the Republic of Indonesia under international law, it is simultaneously framed by several Melanesian actors as part of a broader Melanesian community whose political fate warrants regional attention. Within MSG diplomacy, Papua has thus emerged not merely as a domestic issue of Indonesia, nor solely as a human rights concern, but as a normative battleground where competing principles of solidarity and sovereignty are negotiated, reinterpreted, and selectively invoked ([Lawson, 2016](#)). The persistence of Papua on the MSG agenda illustrates how regional organizations can function as arenas of norm contestation rather than neutral platforms for interstate cooperation. This article distinguishes between the Melanesian Way as an ideological construct and its use as a performative resource in diplomacy. While it is commonly understood as a normative framework rooted in shared identity, cultural affinity, and postcolonial consciousness, this article argues that the Melanesian Way is not merely an abstract or static set of values. Rather, it is actively enacted and mobilized by political actors in diplomatic practice. Within the MSG, references to the Melanesian Way function as strategic tools to frame issues, legitimize political positions, and navigate tensions between competing norms such as solidarity and state sovereignty.

Existing studies on Papua in international relations have largely focused on human rights advocacy, separatist movements, or Indonesia's diplomatic responses to external pressure ([Aspinall & Mietzner, 2014](#)). In parallel, scholarship on the South Pacific has emphasized the growing assertiveness of Pacific regionalism, particularly the role of identity-based diplomacy in amplifying the voices of small island states ([Powles et al., 2023](#)). Yet, relatively little attention has been paid to the normative dynamics that structure regional diplomatic engagement with Papua specifically, how Melanesian solidarity

¹ In this article, I use the term 'Papua' to refer to the western half of the island of New Guinea, which became part of Indonesia in 1969 following the 'Act of Free Choice' (PEPERA).

operates as a normative claim that challenges, constrains, or reshapes the application of state sovereignty within a regional setting. As a result, Papua is often treated either as an empirical problem or a moral issue, rather than as an analytical site for examining deeper normative conflicts in regional diplomacy.

The MSG occupies a distinctive position in this regard. Unlike broader Pacific institutions such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the MSG explicitly defines its membership and political purpose along ethno-cultural lines ([May, 2011](#)). This identity-based foundation enables Melanesian solidarity to function not only as rhetoric, but as a source of normative legitimacy in diplomatic practice. Appeals to shared Melanesian identity, historical marginalization, and collective responsibility are routinely mobilized in MSG statements and deliberations, particularly by states such as Vanuatu, which has consistently framed Papua as an unresolved decolonization and human rights issue affecting the Melanesian family ([Lawson and Wangge, 2023](#)). At the same time, other MSG members including Papua New Guinea and Fiji have adopted more cautious and pragmatic positions, emphasizing respect for Indonesia's sovereignty and the importance of bilateral relations ([Waqavakatoga & Wallis, 2023](#)). These divergent stances underscore that Melanesian solidarity is neither uniform nor uncontested, rather, it is a norm whose meaning and implications are actively debated within the regional diplomatic arena.

From a theoretical perspective, this dynamic resonates with constructivist scholarship on norms and norm contestation in international relations. Norms are not static rules that determine behavior in a linear manner; they are socially constructed, interpreted, and often contested in practice ([Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998](#)). Regional organizations, in particular, serve as important sites where norms are articulated, negotiated, and sometimes reconfigured. The MSG's engagement with Papua thus provides a compelling case for examining how competing norms solidarity and sovereignty interact within a specific regional context. While sovereignty remains a core organizing principle of international order, its application is neither absolute nor immune to challenge, especially in regions where alternative normative frameworks rooted in identity and postcolonial experience carry significant moral and political weight ([Acharya, 2018](#)).

Indonesia's diplomatic engagement with the MSG further illuminates this normative disjuncture. Indonesian diplomacy has consistently relied on legalistic and sovereignty-based arguments, emphasizing territorial integrity, non-interference, and recognition by the international community ([Shibuya, 2004](#)). While such arguments align with prevailing international legal norms, they often fail to resonate within a Melanesian diplomatic discourse that prioritizes shared identity, historical solidarity, and moral responsibility. This normative mismatch helps explain why Indonesia's diplomatic efforts in the South Pacific have frequently encountered resistance or limited effectiveness, despite Indonesia's status as a regional power and development partner. The issue, therefore, is not merely one of insufficient diplomacy or misinformation, but of competing normative logics that shape how Papua is understood and debated.

Importantly, the persistence of Papua in MSG diplomacy does not imply a unified Melanesian challenge to Indonesian sovereignty. Rather, it reflects the coexistence of multiple normative positions within the same regional forum. Some actors invoke Melanesian solidarity to justify advocacy and internationalization, while others reinterpret solidarity in ways that accommodate state sovereignty and regional stability. This internal contestation highlights the MSG as a site of normative pluralism rather than a monolithic bloc. Analyzing Papua through this lens allows for a more nuanced understanding of Melanesian diplomacy one that avoids romanticizing solidarity while also moving beyond state-centric explanations.

Despite its analytical significance, this normative dimension remains underexplored in the literature. Studies that address Melanesian solidarity often treat it as a cultural or rhetorical phenomenon, without examining its concrete diplomatic effects ([Dinnen & Firth, 2008](#)). Conversely, analyses of sovereignty in the Papua context tend to assume its primacy, overlooking how alternative norms may challenge or reshape its application in regional settings. This article seeks to bridge this gap by conceptualizing Papua as an arena of norm contestation within MSG diplomacy, rather than as an isolated political or humanitarian issue.

Accordingly, this study asks: How does the tension between Melanesian solidarity and state sovereignty shape the Melanesian Spearhead Group's diplomatic engagement with the Papua issue? By addressing this question, the article contributes to broader debates on regional norm dynamics, identity-based diplomacy, and the limits of sovereignty in postcolonial regional orders. The objective of this research is to analyze the Papua issue as a site of normative contestation within MSG diplomacy, examining how Melanesian solidarity and state sovereignty are articulated, contested, and negotiated by different actors, and to assess the implications of this conflict for regional diplomacy in the South Pacific and Indonesia's engagement with Melanesian states.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic discussions on Papua and Melanesian regional diplomacy are dispersed across several bodies of literature that rarely intersect in a systematic manner. The first body of scholarship situates Papua primarily within the discourse of human rights, self-determination, and contested decolonization. Studies in this vein emphasize historical grievances, allegations of human rights violations, and efforts to internationalize the Papuan issue through transnational advocacy networks ([Webb-Gannon, 2021](#)). While this literature is essential in documenting the political and humanitarian dimensions of Papua, it often treats regional diplomatic engagement as a secondary or instrumental factor, rather than as a constitutive arena where norms and political meanings are negotiated.

A second strand of literature focuses The West Papua Issue in Pacific Regional Politics: Explaining Indonesia's Foreign Policy Failure. [Lawson and Wangge \(2023\)](#) argue that the internationalization of the West Papua issue in Pacific regional politics reflects the growing

influence of identity-based diplomacy and Melanesian solidarity, which have challenged Indonesia's conventional state-centric diplomatic approach. The article further explains that Indonesia's foreign policy difficulties in the Pacific stem from its limited ability to address normative concerns related to decolonization, human rights, and regional identity. Within this scholarship, the Melanesian Way is frequently described as a guiding ethos emphasizing consensus, communal obligation, and cultural affinity among Melanesian societies ([Lawson and Wangge, 2023](#)). However, this body of work tends to analyze Melanesian solidarity as a relatively cohesive normative framework, paying limited attention to internal divisions and contestation within Melanesian institutions.

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) has received growing scholarly attention as a distinctive sub-regional organization whose identity-based foundation differentiates it from broader Pacific institutions such as the Pacific Islands Forum. [May \(2011\)](#) characterizes the MSG as a testing ground for Melanesian political cooperation, where cultural identity is explicitly mobilized for diplomatic purposes. Subsequent studies highlight the MSG's evolving role as a political forum, particularly in relation to issues framed as affecting Melanesian peoples collectively ([May, 2011](#)). Papua emerges in this literature as a recurring, yet analytically under-theorized, agenda item.

Existing analyses of the MSG's engagement with Papua tend to focus on member states' policy positions rather than the normative structures that underpin them. Vanuatu is often portrayed as the most vocal advocate of Papua, consistently framing the issue in terms of Melanesian solidarity and historical injustice ([Waqavakatoga & Wallis, 2023](#)). In contrast, Papua New Guinea and Fiji are depicted as adopting more cautious stances that prioritize diplomatic relations with Indonesia and adherence to state sovereignty ([Waqavakatoga & Wallis, 2023](#)). While these studies acknowledge divergence within the MSG, they rarely conceptualize this divergence as a form of normative conflict.

As a result, the literature leaves a significant analytical gap. Melanesian solidarity is frequently invoked but insufficiently theorized as a contested norm, while sovereignty is treated as an unquestioned constraint rather than an object of negotiation. This article departs from existing approaches by reading Papua not merely as a political or humanitarian issue, but as a site of norm contestation within Melanesian regional diplomacy. However, much of this literature tends to treat the Melanesian Way as a relatively cohesive and static cultural or ideological construct, emphasizing its role as a shared ethos rather than examining how it operates in practice. Departing from this tendency, this article conceptualizes the Melanesian Way not only as an *idea* but also as a *performative* and *political resource* that is enacted, interpreted, and contested by different actors within regional diplomacy.

Constructivism in International Relations: Analytical Framework

This study is grounded in constructivist theory in International Relations, which challenges the assumption that state behavior is determined solely by material power or fixed interests.

Constructivism posits that international politics is socially constructed through shared ideas, identities, and norms that define what actors perceive as legitimate and appropriate behavior ([Finnemore, 1996](#)). Rather than treating interests as given, constructivists argue that interests are shaped by social interaction and collective meaning. A central contribution of constructivism lies in its emphasis on identity. State identities influence how actors interpret issues, define threats, and justify political action ([Wendt, 1999](#)). In regional contexts, identity-based affiliations such as cultural or historical ties can become powerful sources of diplomatic legitimacy. This is particularly relevant in the South Pacific, where postcolonial experience and shared ethno-cultural identity play a significant role in shaping regional diplomacy.

In the context of the MSG, constructivism provides an appropriate analytical lens for understanding why Papua continues to be discussed despite Indonesia's internationally recognized sovereignty. From a purely realist perspective, MSG engagement with Papua would be difficult to explain, given Indonesia's material power and diplomatic leverage. Constructivism, however, allows for the analysis of Papua as a socially constructed issue, framed through Melanesian identity and moral responsibility rather than strategic interest alone. Moreover, constructivism highlights that norms such as state sovereignty are not merely legal principles but socially embedded ideas whose meaning is shaped by practice ([Reus-Smit, 1999](#)). Sovereignty may be widely accepted at the global level, yet its interpretation can vary across regions. In Melanesian diplomacy, sovereignty coexists with alternative normative commitments rooted in communal solidarity and shared historical experience. Constructivism thus enables an examination of how these competing normative frameworks coexist and interact within regional institutions.

Norm Contestation Theory

Building on constructivism, this study specifically employs norm contestation theory to analyze the dynamics between Melanesian solidarity and state sovereignty. Traditional norm scholarship initially emphasized norm emergence, diffusion, and internalization, often implying a linear progression toward shared understanding ([Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998](#)). More recent scholarship, however, has challenged this view by emphasizing that norms are frequently contested, particularly in pluralistic and postcolonial settings. Norm contestation theory argues that norms do not possess fixed meanings. Instead, their interpretation is constantly debated by political actors who draw on different identities, values, and historical narratives ([Wiener, 2014](#)). Contestation does not necessarily undermine norms; rather, it is a constitutive process through which norms acquire meaning in practice. This perspective is especially useful for analyzing regional organizations, where multiple normative orders may overlap.

In the case of the MSG, two norms are simultaneously operative and in tension. Melanesian solidarity functions as a normative claim rooted in shared identity, legitimizing concern for the political status and human security of Melanesian peoples beyond state

boundaries. State sovereignty, by contrast, is invoked as a legal and diplomatic norm emphasizing territorial integrity and non-interference. The interaction between these norms does not result in clear dominance by either side. Instead, it produces ongoing negotiation, ambiguity, and selective invocation. Norm contestation theory allows this study to conceptualize MSG diplomacy on Papua not as *inconsistent* or *incoherent*, but as the *outcome* of competing normative commitments. Divergent positions among MSG member states such as Vanuatu's advocacy-oriented stance versus the more cautious approaches of Papua New Guinea and Fiji are interpreted as expressions of different normative priorities rather than deviations from a common policy line ([Wiener & Puetter, 2009](#)). By applying norm contestation theory, this research treats diplomatic statements, resolutions, and institutional practices as sites where normative meanings are actively constructed and disputed. This approach moves beyond descriptive accounts of policy positions and offers a theoretically grounded explanation of why Papua remains a persistent and contentious issue within Melanesian regional diplomacy.

In this study, the Melanesian Way is not treated merely as a background cultural norm or a fixed ideological reference. Instead, it is understood as something that is performed and mobilized in diplomatic interactions. As a performative resource, it is strategically invoked by political actors to legitimize claims, construct narratives, and negotiate competing normative commitments within the MSG. This is evident, for example, in how Vanuatu consistently mobilizes the Melanesian Way to frame Papua as a moral and political issue grounded in shared identity and solidarity, while Papua New Guinea and Fiji invoke the same framework to emphasize respect for state sovereignty and the need for cautious engagement. Similarly, MSG leaders' communiqués frequently articulate both "Melanesian solidarity" and "respect for Indonesia's territorial integrity" within the same diplomatic statements, illustrating how these norms are co-performed rather than resolved. This perspective aligns with norm contestation theory by emphasizing that the meaning and function of norms are produced through practice, rather than existing independently of political use.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the normative dynamics surrounding the Papua issue within the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). Qualitative research is particularly suitable for this study because it allows for the interpretation of meanings, norms, and discursive practices embedded in diplomatic texts and institutional statements ([Creswell, 2013](#)). The article is conducted chronologically, beginning with the preparation of study materials, followed by the research design and analytical procedures. The preparation of materials involved a systematic identification of primary and secondary sources relevant to MSG diplomacy and the Papua issue. Primary data consist of official MSG documents, including leaders' communiqués, summit declarations, and official statements addressing Papua, Melanesian identity, human rights, and sovereignty. These

documents are treated as socially constructed texts that reflect normative positions rather than neutral policy outputs ([Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012](#)). Additional primary materials include official speeches and public statements by state representatives from key MSG members, particularly Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji. Secondary data comprise peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and policy analyses on Melanesian regionalism, Papua, and norm dynamics in international relations. These sources are used to contextualize the empirical findings and to situate the analysis within established theoretical debates.

Data collection was conducted through qualitative document analysis, a method that enables systematic examination of written materials to identify patterns, themes, and meanings relevant to the research problem ([Bowen, 2009](#)). Documents were selected based on their explicit reference to Papua and their relevance to debates on regional solidarity and sovereignty, covering the period from the early 2000s to recent MSG summits. Data analysis was carried out using interpretive qualitative analysis informed by norm contestation theory. Interpretive analysis emphasizes how actors construct and justify normative claims through language and institutional practice ([Yanow, 2000](#)). The analysis focused on identifying how Melanesian solidarity and state sovereignty were articulated, prioritized, or contested across different documents and actors. Through this process, the study traces how normative tensions are produced and managed within MSG diplomacy.

To systematically analyze normative patterns, this study employs a qualitative coding procedure that translates textual data into categorical frequency indicators. Each document was read iteratively and coded based on the presence of specific normative references, including “melanesian solidarity,” “human rights,” “state sovereignty,” and “non-interference.” Coding was conducted by identifying keywords, phrases, and contextual expressions associated with each category. For example, references to “melanesian peoples,” “shared identity,” or “regional solidarity” were coded under melanesian solidarity, while phrases such as “territorial integrity” and “non-interference” were coded under state sovereignty. Following this process, the frequency of each normative category was calculated across all documents to identify patterns of emphasis and co-occurrence. These frequencies do not imply quantitative measurement in a statistical sense, but serve as heuristic indicators to support interpretive analysis of how norms are articulated and prioritized in MSG discourse.

This study acknowledges several methodological limitations while also taking steps to address them. First, the reliance on official documents such as communiqués and public statements means that the analysis is limited to formal diplomatic discourse and may not capture informal negotiations or strategic decision-making processes behind the scenes. To mitigate this limitation, the study focuses on patterns of language use across multiple documents over time, allowing for a more robust interpretation of how norms are consistently articulated in official settings. Second, the use of qualitative coding introduces a degree of interpretive subjectivity, as the identification of normative categories depending

on the researcher’s judgment. To address this, the study applies a systematic coding framework with clearly defined categories (e.g., solidarity, sovereignty, human rights) and consistent criteria across all documentation. Repeated readings and cross-checking of coded segments were conducted to ensure internal consistency and reduce individual bias. Third, while frequency counts of normative references provide useful analytical structure, they do not measure the relative political weight or impact of each norm. To overcome this limitation, the study combines frequency-based observations with in-depth qualitative interpretation, ensuring that the analysis remains sensitive to context and meaning rather than relying solely on numerical representation. Taken together, these steps strengthen the validity of the findings by balancing interpretive depth with systematic analysis, making this approach suitable for examining the discursive and performative dimensions of diplomacy in International Relations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Normative Tension between Melanesian Solidarity and State Sovereignty in MSG Discourse

In this context, the Melanesian Way operates not only as a normative idea but also as a performative diplomatic practice. It is enacted through official statements, discursive framing, and selective invocation by MSG member states to articulate positions on Papua. This performative dimension allows the Melanesian Way to function as a flexible resource, enabling actors to express solidarity while simultaneously navigating the constraints imposed by state sovereignty. The analysis of official MSG documents reveals a persistent normative tension between Melanesian solidarity and state sovereignty, rather than a coherent or unified normative stance. This tension is evident in the language, framing, and agenda-setting practices within MSG diplomacy, particularly in documents addressing Papua, where leaders “recognised the legitimate concerns of Melanesian peoples in West Papua” while simultaneously reaffirming “full respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Indonesia” ([MSG Leaders’ Communiqué, 2018](#)). Between 2005 and 2023, Papua was explicitly referenced in 11 out of 18 MSG Leaders Communiqués, either directly or indirectly through references to Melanesian peoples, human rights concerns, or self-determination ([Melanesian Spearhead Group, 2005–2023](#)). A qualitative coding of these documents shows that normative references to Melanesian solidarity and sovereignty coexist, often within the same communiqué, as reflected in formulations that “recognise the concerns raised regarding West Papua while respecting Indonesia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity,” producing ambiguity rather than normative resolution.

Table 1. Normative References in MSG Communiqués (2005–2023)

Normative Frame	Frequency of Explicit Reference
Melanesian solidarity / Melanesian peoples	27

Human rights / Dignity	19
State sovereignty / Territorial integrity	22
Non-interference	14

Source: Compiled from [MSG Leaders' Communiqués \(2005\)](#) and [\(2023\)](#)

This pattern indicates that Melanesian solidarity does not replace sovereignty as a guiding norm, instead, it contests its scope and application. From a constructivist perspective, norms are not hierarchical by default but gain meaning through practice ([Wendt, 1999](#)). The MSG's discourse demonstrates how solidarity functions as a moral claim that legitimizes discussion of Papua, while sovereignty operates as a legal constraint that limits collective action. Importantly, the absence of a definitive normative resolution should not be interpreted as institutional weakness. Drawing on norm contestation theory, this ambiguity reflects an ongoing struggle over normative meaning rather than a failure of consensus ([Wiener, 2014](#)). The MSG institutional space allows both norms to be articulated without requiring their reconciliation, thereby sustaining Papua as a legitimate but unresolved agenda item.

This dynamic is embedded within the discursive practices and diplomatic routines of MSG member states. Rather than manifesting as an explicit institutional conflict, this tension is embedded within the discursive practices and diplomatic routines of MSG member states. A qualitative analysis of MSG leaders' communiqués, ministerial statements, and official declarations from the early 2000s to the early 2020s demonstrates that Melanesian solidarity is consistently articulated as a moral and cultural norm grounded in shared identity, as reflected in references to "shared cultural and historical ties among Melanesian peoples," while sovereignty is mobilized as a legal and political principle that circumscribes the scope of collective action through commitments to "respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity" ([Melanesian Spearhead Group, 2000–2022](#)). This coexistence does not signal normative coherence but rather reflects an unresolved contestation over the meaning and limits of regional responsibility.

In practice, this solidarity is articulated through references to shared identity, ancestry, and historical experience. In MSG discourse, Papua is framed as part of a broader Melanesian family, allowing the issue to be discussed within a regional identity framework without immediately challenging Indonesia's territorial claims. However, solidarity is articulated primarily as an ethical concern rather than a juridical entitlement. Official statements emphasize concern, attention, and dialogue, while avoiding language associated with political enforcement or intervention ([Lawson, 2016](#)). Official statements emphasize concern, attention, and dialogue, as reflected in language that "encourage constructive dialogue" and "note ongoing developments," while avoiding terms associated with political enforcement or intervention such as binding commitments or coercive measures ([MSG Leaders' Communiqué, 2016; 2020](#)). From a constructivist perspective, this framing indicates

that solidarity functions as a constitutive norm shaping collective identity rather than as a regulative norm that mandates specific behavior ([Wendt, 1999](#)).

Sovereignty, however, functions as a stabilizing and delimiting norm within these diplomatic formulations. References to respect for territorial integrity, non-interference, and international law are routinely attached to discussions of Papua, particularly when statements are directed toward external audiences. This functions as a diplomatic shield that limits escalation ([Waqavakatoga & Wallis, 2023](#)). Importantly, sovereignty is rarely framed as opposing Melanesian solidarity, instead, it is presented as the condition under which solidarity can be responsibly exercised. This rhetorical coupling masks the constraining effect of sovereignty by portraying it as a neutral procedural requirement rather than a political choice.

The persistence of this normative tension is deeply shaped by the postcolonial condition of MSG member states. Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Solomon Islands share experiences of colonial rule, late state formation, and internal diversity. These historical trajectories generate a heightened sensitivity to issues of secession and internal dissent. Supporting Papuan self-determination too forcefully risks establishing a normative precedent that could reverberate domestically ([Chandler, 2006](#)). Sovereignty, therefore, is not merely an abstract legal principle but a protective norm rooted in political vulnerability. This helps explain why even states such as Vanuatu, which have been more vocal in supporting Papuan rights, often temper their positions within collective MSG forums.

The institutional structure of the MSG further reinforces this normative ambiguity. The organization relies on consensus-based decision-making and produces largely non-binding outcomes. Unlike more formal regional organizations, the MSG lacks enforcement mechanisms and legal authority to impose collective positions. This institutional design allows disagreement to persist without disrupting organizational cohesion. Papua remains an active but unresolved agenda item. Institutional thus becomes a governance strategy that accommodates divergent normative commitments among members ([Acharya, 2018](#)). This pattern aligns with Antje Wiener's concept of norm contestation, which emphasizes that norms are not fixed but continuously negotiated through practice ([Wiener, 2017](#)). In the MSG context, contestation occurs implicitly rather than through open debate. Member states do not publicly dispute the value of Melanesian solidarity, nor do they openly reject sovereignty. Instead, they enact a form of normative balancing through selective emphasis, strategic silence, and carefully calibrated language. Papua becomes a site where norms are performed rather than resolved.

Empirical data from MSG documents illustrate this selective activation of norms. Between 2010 and 2022, MSG leaders' communiqués referenced Melanesian identity and solidarity in relation to Papua in more than half of all statements mentioning the issue, yet explicit references to self-determination or political status appeared in less than 20 percent of cases ([MSG leaders' communiqués, 2010–2022](#)). Conversely, references to sovereignty and territorial integrity appeared in nearly all communiqués that included Papua, particularly

following Indonesia's admission as an associate member of the MSG in 2015. This pattern reinforces the argument that sovereignty constrains the translation of normative claims into political action.

Constructivist theory helps explain why this normative tension persists without resolution. As [Finnemore and Sikkink \(1998\)](#) argue, norms gain influence through social acceptance and repeated enactment, not through formal codification alone. In the MSG, Melanesian solidarity serves an identity-affirming function that sustains the organization's *raison d'être*, while sovereignty ensures continued engagement with external actors and preserves diplomatic legitimacy. Neither norm can be fully abandoned without undermining the organization's internal cohesion or external credibility. The Papua issue thus occupies an ambivalent position within MSG diplomacy. It is simultaneously acknowledged as a matter of shared identity and constrained as an issue of domestic jurisdiction. This ambivalence reflects a stabilized balance between competing normative commitments. Papua remains visible within regional discourse, yet insulated from collective political action. Norm contestation, in this sense, produces continuity rather than change.

This analysis contributes to broader debates in International Relations by demonstrating how regional organizations in the Global South manage normative conflict under conditions of political vulnerability. Contrary to expectations of norm convergence, the MSG case illustrates that sustained ambiguity can be an effective strategy for managing competing normative commitments. The conflict between Melanesian solidarity and sovereignty does not culminate in institutional rupture but is instead reproduced through everyday diplomatic practice. Papua, therefore, is less a catalyst for normative transformation than a mirror reflecting the limits and possibilities of regional norm-making in postcolonial contexts.

MSG as an Arena of Norm Contestation in Papua Diplomacy

The MSG does not act as a unitary diplomatic actor; rather, it serves as an arena of norm contestation among its member states. This contestation becomes most visible when comparing the diplomatic positions of Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji.

Vanuatu consistently frames Papua through the lens of Melanesian solidarity and moral responsibility, frequently invoking historical injustice and the shared identity of Melanesian peoples. In contrast, Papua New Guinea and Fiji emphasize state sovereignty and regional stability, often framing Papua as a sensitive bilateral issue between Indonesia and its domestic population ([Waqavakatoga & Wallis, 2023](#)). This divergence illustrates how the same normative vocabulary is deployed differently. While all three states reference solidarity, only Vanuatu treats it as a justification for sustained advocacy. Papua New Guinea and Fiji strategically reinterpret the Melanesian Way to align with the principle of state sovereignty, using it to justify a more cautious and non-confrontational diplomatic stance. This finding supports Acharya's argument that norms are localized rather than uniformly adopted ([Acharya, 2004](#)).

Figure 1 (see below) demonstrates a clear asymmetry in the frequency of Papua-related statements among key MSG member states between 2010 and 2022. Vanuatu appears as the most vocal actor, consistently issuing statements that frame Papua as a regional moral concern grounded in Melanesian identity and human rights. This pattern reflects Vanuatu's long-standing role as a normative entrepreneur within the MSG, seeking to elevate Melanesian solidarity beyond symbolic recognition and into sustained diplomatic advocacy (Lawson, 2016). The higher frequency of statements indicates not only normative commitment but also an effort to normalize Papua as a legitimate regional issue within MSG discourse.

By contrast, Papua New Guinea and Fiji exhibit significantly lower and more episodic engagement with the Papua issue. While formally endorsing Melanesian solidarity, both states tend to emphasize sovereignty and non-interference, particularly in statements directed toward external audiences. This selective engagement illustrates how sovereignty operates as a constraining norm that shapes not only the content but also the intensity of diplomatic expression (Waqavakatoga & Wallis, 2023), as reflected in statements that reaffirm “respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Indonesia” while limiting responses to calls to “encourage constructive dialogue” (MSG Leaders' Communiqué, 2018; 2020). From a norm contestation perspective, the empirical pattern shown in Figure 1 supports the argument MSG diplomacy on Papua is characterized by differentiated normative activation rather than collective convergence, as seen in formulations that “recognise the concerns raised regarding West Papua” without advancing binding commitments, allowing Melanesian solidarity and state sovereignty to coexist without direct confrontation (Wiener, 2014).

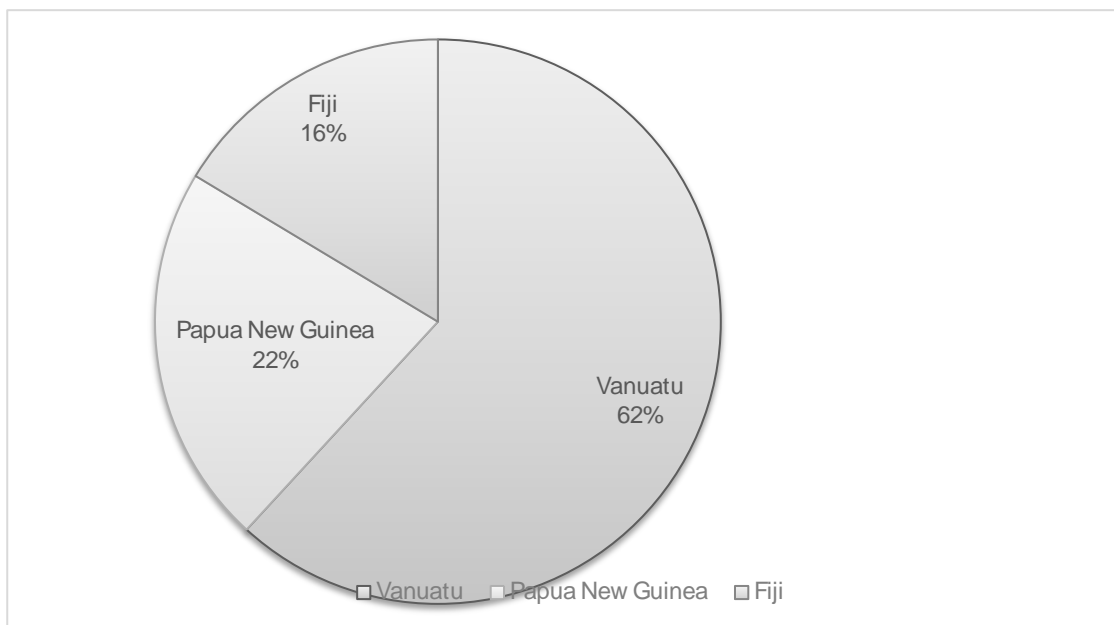


Figure 1. Frequency of Papua-Related Statements by Selected MSG Members (2010–2022)

Source: [Government statements and MSG meeting records](#)

The distribution of normative framing further reinforces the argument that MSG diplomacy on Papua is shaped by differentiated normative priorities rather than a shared collective stance (see Table 2). Vanuatu consistently mobilizes the Melanesian Way as a diplomatic resource to legitimize its advocacy for Papua, framing the issue as a moral obligation grounded in shared identity. This framing aligns with Vanuatu’s long-standing foreign policy orientation toward decolonization and self-determination, positioning it as a norm entrepreneur within the MSG (Lawson, 2016). In contrast, Papua New Guinea and Fiji predominantly frame Papua in terms of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference, reflecting a cautious diplomatic posture shaped by domestic political considerations and regional stability concerns (Waqavakatoga & Wallis, 2023). The juxtaposition of these framings demonstrates that norm contestation within the MSG does not occur through explicit disagreement, but through parallel and selective deployment of norms. As a result, Papua remains institutionally acknowledged but politically contained, illustrating how Melanesian solidarity and state sovereignty coexist as competing yet mutually constraining norms within MSG diplomacy (Wiener, 2014).

Table 2. Normative Framing of Papua by MSG Member States (Leaders’ Communiqués)

State	Dominant Normative Frame	Diplomatic Orientation
Vanuatu	Melanesian solidarity	Advocacy & internationalization
Papua New Guinea	Sovereignty & non-interference	Bilateral accommodation
Fiji	Sovereignty with regional pragmatism	Strategic neutrality

Source: [Melanesian Spearhead Group \(2000–2022\)](#)

This variation demonstrates that the Melanesian Way is not uniformly interpreted across MSG member states, but is performed differently depending on each actor’s diplomatic priorities and political constraints. Rather than reflecting a shared and fixed cultural understanding, the Melanesian Way emerges as a dynamic and context-dependent resource, selectively mobilized to support either advocacy-oriented or sovereignty-oriented positions. The MSG’s engagement with Indonesia further reinforces this interpretation. Indonesia was granted associate membership in 2015, a decision that symbolically acknowledges Melanesian identity while institutionally reinforcing sovereignty. This dual move exemplifies norm contestation in practice: solidarity is recognized, but its political implications are constrained. Rather than resolving the Papua issue, MSG diplomacy institutionalizes normative tension. Constructivism helps explain why this arrangement persists, identities and norms shape what is considered diplomatically acceptable, but they do not dictate uniform outcomes (Finnemore, 1996).

Rather than merely reflecting a shared belief system, references to the Melanesian Way in MSG discourse illustrate how the concept is actively used by member states as a

diplomatic resource. For instance, Vanuatu mobilizes it to legitimize advocacy for Papua, while Papua New Guinea and Fiji reinterpret it in ways that align with sovereignty and regional stability. This demonstrates that the Melanesian Way is not simply an abstract idea, but a performative tool enacted differently across diplomatic contexts.

Explaining the Persistence of Papua through Constructivism and Norm Contestation

From a theoretical standpoint, the persistence of Papua in MSG diplomacy can be best explained through constructivism combined with norm contestation theory. Materialist explanations such as power asymmetry or economic dependence on Indonesia cannot fully account for why Papua remains on the MSG agenda despite repeated affirmations of Indonesian sovereignty. Constructivism directs attention to how shared identity and historical narratives shape political meaning. Papua is constructed within MSG discourse not merely as a territorial issue, but as part of a broader Melanesian moral community ([Lawson and Wangge, 2023](#)). This construction legitimizes ongoing discussion even in the absence of concrete policy outcomes. Norm contestation theory further explains why this discussion does not translate into collective action. The contest between solidarity and sovereignty produces a normative stalemate, where neither norm can fully displace the other. According to [Wiener and Puetter \(2009\)](#), such contestation is a normal feature of plural normative orders rather than an anomaly

This model demonstrates that Papua persists not because the MSG seeks resolution, but because normative contestation sustains its relevance. Diplomatic ambiguity becomes a strategic outcome rather than a failure. Indonesia's diplomatic responses further illustrate this dynamic. Indonesian statements consistently emphasize sovereignty, development assistance, and non-interference, aligning with global norms but failing to fully engage with Melanesian identity-based claims ([Shibuya, 2004](#)). This mismatch of normative registers limits the effectiveness of Indonesia's diplomacy in Melanesia, despite its material advantages.

The persistence of Papua within MSG diplomacy can be most convincingly explained through a constructivist lens that foregrounds norms, identity, and contestation rather than material power or institutional capacity. From a constructivist perspective, issues endure in international politics not solely because of strategic interests, but because they acquire shared meaning within social structures ([Wendt, 1999](#)). Papua persists within MSG not as a policy agenda with clear outcomes, but as a normatively charged symbol that continuously reproduces Melanesian identity while simultaneously testing the limits of state sovereignty. Constructivism emphasizes that regional organizations are social arenas where collective identities are constituted and reaffirmed ([Acharya, 2018](#)). Within the MSG, Melanesian identity functions as a foundational narrative that legitimizes the organization's existence, as reflected in references to "shared cultural and historical ties among Melanesian peoples" and commitments to "promoting the welfare and solidarity of Melanesian communities" ([MSG Leaders' Communiqué, 2013; 2016](#)). Papua, as a Melanesian society under Indonesian

sovereignty, occupies a unique symbolic position within this narrative. Its inclusion in MSG discourse reinforces the idea of a transnational Melanesian community that transcends state borders, even when political action is constrained. As a result, Papua remains discursively indispensable: removing it entirely from the agenda would weaken the MSG's claim to represent Melanesian solidarity.

However, constructivism alone cannot fully account for why Papua remains unresolved. This is where norm contestation theory becomes analytically essential. Norm contestation highlights that norms are not static or universally agreed upon, rather, their meaning and applicability are continuously negotiated among actors with divergent interests ([Wiener, 2014](#)). In the MSG context, Melanesian solidarity and state sovereignty coexist as competing yet legitimate norms. Neither norm fully displaces the other, resulting in a sustained condition of normative ambiguity. Papua persists precisely because it is the site where this contestation is enacted. Member states repeatedly invoke solidarity to justify engagement, while simultaneously mobilizing sovereignty to limit its consequences. This dynamic produces what can be described as a contained issue: Papua is sufficiently salient to remain visible, but insufficiently consolidated to trigger collective action. Such containment is not accidental, but a product of deliberate diplomatic practice shaped by postcolonial vulnerability and regional power asymmetries ([Waqavakatoga & Wallis, 2023](#)).

Norm contestation theory further explains why the MSG has avoided institutional closure on Papua. As [Wiener \(2014\)](#) argues, contestation does not necessarily undermine norms; instead, it can stabilize governance arrangements by allowing flexibility and coexistence. In this sense, the absence of resolution should not be interpreted as failure. The persistence of Papua reflects a stable equilibrium in which competing norms constrain each other, preventing both escalation and disappearance. Moreover, Papua's persistence serves a functional role within MSG diplomacy. It allows member states to perform normative commitments without incurring prohibitive political costs. Vanuatu can assert its identity as a champion of Melanesian solidarity, while Papua New Guinea and Fiji can reaffirm sovereignty norms critical to their own domestic stability. The issue thus operates as a discursive bridge between identity affirmation and political restraint. In sum, the continued presence of Papua within MSG diplomacy is best understood as a product of socially constructed meanings and ongoing norm contestation. Papua endures not because of institutional momentum or strategic payoff, but because it enables the MSG to negotiate its identity, legitimacy, and limits as a regional organization. Constructivism reveals how Papua acquires meaning, while norm contestation explains why that meaning remains unresolved yet enduring.

CONCLUSION

The article examines how the tension between Melanesian solidarity and state sovereignty shapes the Melanesian Spearhead Group's (MSG) diplomacy on the Papua issue. The findings confirm that Papua's continued presence within MSG discourse reflects a stable

normative configuration rather than institutional indecision. Competing norms are not resolved through formal agreement, but are managed through diplomatic practice, enabling Papua to remain visible while limiting collective political action. Melanesian solidarity functions primarily as an identity-affirming norm that legitimizes regional attention to Papua and sustains the MSG's claim to represent a shared Melanesian community. Sovereignty, by contrast, operates as a constraining norm that delineates the boundaries of permissible engagement. The interaction between these norms explains why expressions of concern and recognition persist without evolving into coordinated policy measures. Papua is thus acknowledged as a regional moral concern while remaining politically contained within existing state-centric frameworks.

The findings also underscore that the Melanesian Way should not be understood solely as an abstract normative framework. Instead, it functions as a performative resource that is actively enacted in diplomatic practice, shaping how regional actors frame issues, justify positions, and manage normative tensions. Recognizing this performative dimension provides a more nuanced understanding of how identity-based norms operate within regional diplomacy, particularly in postcolonial contexts such as the MSG. The analysis also demonstrates that norm contestation within MSG diplomacy occurs implicitly through language, emphasis, and frequency of engagement rather than through overt institutional confrontation. Differences in how member states articulate and prioritize Papua reveal differentiated normative positioning shaped by historical experience, domestic vulnerability, and diplomatic considerations. These variations do not weaken the organization; instead, they allow normative flexibility while preserving collective cohesion. In addressing the article's objective, the findings affirm that the persistence of Papua within MSG diplomacy is best understood as an outcome of normative coexistence. The MSG accommodates Melanesian solidarity and state sovereignty as mutually constraining principles, illustrating how regional organizations in postcolonial contexts navigate identity-based claims without undermining foundational norms of statehood.

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