

The Evolution of the Indonesian Military's Counterinsurgency Strategy in the Modern Asymmetric Warfare Landscape in Papua

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ARTICLE INFO

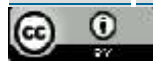
Keywords: Counterinsurgency, Asymmetric Warfare, Indonesian National Armed Forces, Papua, National Security

Received : 28, November

Revised : 30, December

Accepted: 26, January

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ABSTRACT

This study is grounded in the problem of how TNI's counterinsurgency strategy has evolved in response to the dynamics of modern asymmetric warfare in Papua and to what extent these strategies have been effective. The research aims to analyze the paradigm shift and implementation of TNI's counterinsurgency strategy in addressing multidimensional insurgent threats, as well as to identify challenges and opportunities for strengthening future strategies. This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical research design, utilizing literature review methods on academic books, scholarly journals, policy documents, and official publications from state institutions such as the Ministry of Defense and the TNI. The findings indicate that TNI's counterinsurgency strategy has shifted from a predominantly military-centric approach toward a more comprehensive, adaptive, and integrated framework involving non-military components, including intelligence operations, strategic communication, and development synergy. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain, particularly in managing information warfare, addressing human rights sensitivities, and enhancing inter-agency coordination. In conclusion, the effectiveness of TNI's counterinsurgency in Papua depends on its capacity to manage asymmetric warfare holistically. This study recommends strengthening the integration of military and non-military approaches, enhancing intelligence capabilities, and optimizing strategic communication to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of counterinsurgency policies in Papua.

INTRODUCTION

The conflict in Papua is one of the most complex national security challenges in the context of Indonesia's defense. Unlike conventional armed conflicts, the security dynamics in Papua have developed into a low-intensity insurgency that exploits power imbalances, extreme geographical conditions, and issues of identity, politics, and human rights. This pattern reflects the nature of asymmetric warfare, in which non-state actors attempt to counterbalance state superiority through unconventional strategies, including information warfare and legitimacy (Indonesian Ministry of Defense, 2015; Susanto, 2020).

The state's handling of the conflict in Papua, particularly through the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), has undergone significant dynamics and strategic adjustments. In the early phase, the security approach tended to be dominated by coercive force-based military operations oriented towards regional stabilization and the suppression of armed groups. This approach was in line with the traditional threat paradigm, which placed military force as the main instrument in maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state (TNI, 2018). However, in practice, this approach faced limitations when dealing with insurgencies that operated not only in the physical realm but also in the social, political, and information domains.

The development of the conflict in Papua shows that armed groups do not solely rely on military force, but also utilize political narratives, symbolism, and international support as part of their struggle strategy. Issues of human rights violations, self-determination, and the marginalization of local communities are used as instruments to build political pressure on the state at the global level. This pattern is in line with the nature of modern asymmetric conflicts, where success is not measured solely by military victory, but also by the ability to influence public perception and legitimacy (Erfan, 2021; Nainggolan, 2025).

In this context, the conflict in Papua also highlights the importance of intelligence as a central element in counterinsurgency strategies. Intelligence not only functions as a tool for gathering information, but also as an instrument for understanding social dynamics, insurgency support networks, and the potential for conflict escalation. The modern counterinsurgency model places intelligence as the main foundation in the formulation of adaptive and precise strategies, especially in dealing with non-state actors who move covertly and in a fragmented manner (Erfan, 2021).

Modern counterinsurgency strategies require a more comprehensive and adaptive approach. Counterinsurgency literature emphasizes the importance of a population-centric counterinsurgency approach, integration between security and development operations, and management of state legitimacy through compliance with humanitarian law and protection of civilians (Susanto, 2020; Nainggolan, 2025). In the Indonesian context, the defense doctrine asserts that threats to the state are multidimensional and require synergy between military and non-military instruments (Indonesian Ministry of Defense, 2015).

The TNI, as the state apparatus in the field of defense, has demonstrated a process of strategic adaptation in response to changes in the nature of threats in Papua. The shift towards a Non-War Military Operations (OMSP) approach,

the strengthening of territorial functions, the increased role of intelligence, and efforts to manage strategic communication reflect the evolution of a counterinsurgency strategy that is no longer solely oriented towards armed action (TNI, 2018). This adaptation shows that counterinsurgency in Papua is moving towards a more intelligence-led, legitimacy-based, and multi-domain pattern.

However, despite indications of a change in strategy, academic studies discussing this process as an evolution of the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy in the modern asymmetric warfare landscape are still relatively limited. Some studies emphasize legal, human rights, or political aspects separately, without linking them to the dynamics of strategic adaptation of the military as a learning military organization (Susanto, 2020; Erfan, 2021).

Based on these conditions, the purpose of this study is to analyze the evolution of the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy in facing the modern asymmetric warfare landscape in Papua. This study aims to identify changes in the TNI's strategic approach, the factors driving this adaptation, and its relevance to modern counterinsurgency principles and Indonesia's national defense doctrine.

This research has urgency in several aspects. First, academically, this research contributes to enriching the study of asymmetric warfare and counterinsurgency in Indonesia by placing Papua as a multidimensional strategic case study. Second, practically and strategically, this research is relevant to the development of national counterinsurgency doctrine and policy that is more adaptive to non-conventional threats. Third, in terms of public policy, this research provides an analytical perspective on the importance of balancing security effectiveness, legal compliance, and state legitimacy in maintaining long-term national stability (Indonesian Ministry of Defense, 2015; Nainggolan, 2025).

Thus, this study emphasizes that counterinsurgency in Papua cannot be understood solely as a military operational issue, but rather as part of the state's defense strategy in facing modern asymmetric warfare, which requires continuous adaptation, integration of state instruments, and comprehensive management of legitimacy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework in this study was developed to provide a conceptual basis for analyzing the evolution of the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy in the modern asymmetric warfare landscape in Papua. This framework integrates three main approaches, namely asymmetric warfare theory, counterinsurgency (COIN) theory, and military strategy adaptation theory. These three approaches are used complementarily to understand the dynamics of conflict, state responses, and changes in defense strategies in the face of non-conventional threats.

Asymmetric Warfare Theory

Asymmetric warfare refers to conflicts between actors with significant disparities in military capabilities, resources, and political legitimacy. In asymmetric conditions, weaker actors tend to avoid direct confrontation and utilize unconventional strategies such as guerrilla warfare, sabotage, propaganda, and exploitation of political and humanitarian issues (Mack, 1975). Military superiority does not always guarantee victory, as success in asymmetric conflicts is largely determined by political resilience, legitimacy, and public support.

In contemporary developments, asymmetric warfare does not only take place on physical battlefields, but also encompasses the informational, social, and legal domains. The Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Indonesia (2015) emphasizes that threats to the state are multidimensional and involve a combination of military and non-military threats. Therefore, the conflict in Papua can be understood as a form of modern asymmetric warfare, in which insurgent groups exploit power imbalances to build political and international pressure on the state.

Counter-Insurgency Theory

Counter-insurgency is a set of strategies and policies designed to counter insurgency with the aim of restoring state authority and legitimacy. David Galula (1964) emphasized that the core of counterinsurgency is not merely the destruction of the enemy, but rather the control and protection of the population (population-centric approach). Within this framework, the success of counterinsurgency is highly dependent on the state's ability to win the support of the community and sever the ties between the insurgents and their social base.

Galula's approach is reinforced by McCormick (1997) through the Mystic Diamond Model, which places the state, insurgents, society, and external actors in a dynamic relationship. This model is relevant for analyzing the conflict in Papua, where insurgency interacts not only with the state and local communities, but also with external actors through international advocacy networks and information warfare. In the Indonesian context, the principles of modern counterinsurgency are reflected in the TNI doctrine, which emphasizes the role of Non-War Military Operations (OMSP) as part of a comprehensive approach to dealing with non-conventional threats (TNI, 2018).

The Role of Intelligence in Modern Counterinsurgency

In asymmetric conflicts, intelligence plays a central role as the main supporting instrument of counterinsurgency strategies. Intelligence not only serves to detect and neutralize armed threats, but also to understand social dynamics, insurgency support networks, and the development of conflict narratives. The modern counterinsurgency model places intelligence at the foundation of intelligence-led operations, enabling states to respond to threats with precision and adaptability (Erfan, 2021).

This approach is in line with the view of the Indonesian Ministry of Defense (2015), which emphasizes the importance of information mastery and

synergy between state instruments in dealing with hybrid and asymmetric threats. In the context of Papua, the role of intelligence is crucial in managing latent and multidimensional conflicts, as well as in maintaining state legitimacy amid domestic and international pressure.

The Theory of Military Strategy Adaptation

The theory of military strategy adaptation explains that military organizations are not static, but rather undergo a process of learning and adjusting to changes in the strategic environment. According to Posen (1984), changes in military doctrine are influenced by internal organizational factors and external pressures that force military institutions to adapt. This adaptation has become increasingly important in dealing with non-conventional conflicts that demand flexibility and strategic innovation.

In the Indonesian context, the adaptation of the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy can be understood as a response to changes in the nature of threats in Papua, which require the integration of military, intelligence, and civilian instruments. This process reflects the transformation of the TNI as a learning organization that seeks to adapt to the demands of modern asymmetric warfare (Susanto, 2020).

Based on these theories, this study views the conflict in Papua as an arena of modern asymmetric warfare that demands adaptive counterinsurgency strategies. The evolution of the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy is analyzed as the result of interactions between the nature of asymmetric threats, modern counterinsurgency principles, the role of intelligence, and the process of military strategy adaptation. This theoretical framework forms the basis for analysis to understand how the TNI responds to the dynamics of the Papua conflict and its implications for security effectiveness and state legitimacy.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical research type. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand and analyze social and strategic phenomena in depth, particularly related to the evolution of the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy in facing the modern asymmetric war landscape in Papua. According to Sugiyono (2019), qualitative research is used to examine natural conditions, where the researcher acts as a key instrument and the research results emphasize meaning rather than generalization.

Descriptive research aims to systematically and factually describe the phenomenon being studied. The descriptive approach is used to map the characteristics of asymmetric conflict in Papua and changes in the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy over time. Furthermore, analysis is carried out to interpret these dynamics within the framework of modern asymmetric warfare and counterinsurgency theory. Sugiyono (2019) states that descriptive research aims to describe or depict the state of the research object as it is.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Landscape of Modern Asymmetric Warfare in Papua: The Nature of the Threat and the Dynamics of Conflict

The conflict in Papua exhibits the distinctive characteristics of modern asymmetric warfare, in which the imbalance of power between the state and non-state actors does not result in absolute domination by the state. Insurgent groups in Papua exploit difficult geographical conditions, local social structures, and issues of identity and politics as instruments to counterbalance the military superiority of the state. This pattern is in line with the concept of asymmetric warfare, which emphasizes that weaker actors will avoid direct confrontation and choose unconventional strategies (Mack, 1975).

In its development, the Papua conflict has not only taken the form of armed violence, but has also expanded into the domains of information and legitimacy. Narratives of human rights violations, demands for self-determination, and framing the conflict as a global humanitarian issue are part of the insurgency's strategy to build international support. This condition reinforces the view that the Papua conflict is multidimensional, in which the political, social, and informational dimensions play a role that is as important as the military dimension (Indonesian Ministry of Defense, 2015).

The nature of modern asymmetric warfare in Papua demands a state response that is not only oriented towards armed action. As the conflict moves into the realm of public perception and opinion, the success of counterinsurgency is highly dependent on the state's ability to maintain legitimacy, build public trust, and manage information strategically. Thus, Papua can be understood as a testing ground for the effectiveness of the state's counterinsurgency strategy in dealing with complex non-conventional threats.

The Evolution of the TNI's Counterinsurgency Strategy

In facing the dynamics of the conflict in Papua, the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy has undergone a significant evolution. In the early phase, the approach used tended to be militaristic and state-centric, with a focus on stabilizing security through conventional military operations. This approach reflected the traditional security paradigm that placed military force as the main instrument in dealing with armed threats (TNI, 2018).

However, as the nature of the conflict became more asymmetrical, this approach showed its limitations. Insurgents operating covertly, utilizing local social networks, and moving outside conventional battlefields demanded a change in strategy. In this context, the TNI began to adopt a more adaptive approach through Non-War Military Operations (OMSP), strengthening territorial functions, and integrating with civilian actors and local governments. This shift indicates a process of institutional learning within the TNI in response to strategic environmental pressures (Susanto, 2020).

The evolution of the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy is also reflected in the increased role of intelligence as the backbone of operations. The intelligence-led counterinsurgency approach allows the TNI to understand the patterns of insurgency movements, the social dynamics of society, and the potential for

conflict escalation with greater precision. This is in line with the view that modern counterinsurgency cannot be separated from the state's ability to manage strategic information and knowledge (Erfan, 2021). Thus, the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy has moved from a reactive approach to a more preventive and adaptive approach in dealing with modern asymmetric warfare.

Strategic Implications of the Indonesian Military's Counterinsurgency in Modern Asymmetric Warfare in Papua

The evolution of the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy in dealing with the conflict in Papua has a number of important strategic implications. Operationally, an adaptive approach allows the state to suppress the insurgency without excessively escalating violence. The integration of security operations, intelligence, and a territorial approach creates a more layered and sustainable pattern of conflict management.

From a legitimacy perspective, modern counterinsurgency strategies demand a balance between security effectiveness and compliance with the law and protection of civilians. In asymmetric warfare, legitimacy is the center of gravity that determines a state's success. Any action perceived as a violation of the law or injustice has the potential to be exploited by insurgents as a tool for propaganda and delegitimization of the state (Nainggolan, 2025).

In the context of national defense policy, the experience of counterinsurgency in Papua provides strategic lessons on the importance of a multi-domain approach in dealing with unconventional threats. Modern asymmetric warfare requires synergy between military forces, diplomatic instruments, social development, and strategic communication by the state. Therefore, the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy cannot stand alone but must be integrated into a comprehensive and adaptive national defense framework (Indonesian Ministry of Defense, 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

The conflict in Papua is a form of modern asymmetric warfare that is multidimensional, in which armed violence is only one instrument in a broader conflict dynamic. The nature of the conflict, which involves political, social, and informational dimensions, means that a conventional security approach based solely on military superiority is no longer adequate to achieve sustainable stability.

The results of the analysis show that the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy in Papua has undergone a significant evolution in line with changes in the nature of the threat. The shift from a militaristic approach to a more adaptive strategy is reflected in the strengthening of Non-War Military Operations (OMSP), the increased role of intelligence, and integration with civilian actors and local governments. This evolution demonstrates a process of institutional learning within the TNI in response to the demands of modern asymmetric warfare.

This study emphasizes that state legitimacy is a key factor in the success of counterinsurgency. In the context of asymmetric warfare, the success of security operations is determined not only by operational effectiveness, but also

by the state's ability to maintain public trust and manage public perception. Therefore, an adaptive counterinsurgency strategy oriented towards protecting the community is an important prerequisite for creating long-term security stability in Papua.

The evolution of the TNI's counterinsurgency strategy in Papua can be understood as part of the transformation of the state's defense strategy in facing non-conventional threats. Papua provides an empirical context that demonstrates the importance of integrating state instruments, continuous adaptation, and the balance between security effectiveness and political legitimacy in modern asymmetric warfare.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, several suggestions can be put forward as follows:

1. **Strengthening the Adaptive Approach in Counterinsurgency**
The TNI's counterinsurgency strategy needs to be continuously developed by emphasizing an adaptive approach that integrates security operations, intelligence, and a territorial approach. This approach is important in order to respond to fluid and unconventional threats.
2. **Enhancing Synergy Between State Instruments**
The handling of the conflict in Papua requires stronger synergy between the TNI, law enforcement agencies, local governments, and relevant ministries/institutions. The integration of security policies with social and economic development is necessary to narrow the space for insurgency in a sustainable manner.
3. **Management of Legitimacy and Strategic Communication**
The state needs to pay more attention to the management of legitimacy through effective and transparent strategic communication. In modern asymmetric warfare, control of narratives and information is an important element in preventing the delegitimization of the state at the domestic and international levels.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Further research is recommended to expand the analysis using more diverse empirical approaches, such as in-depth interviews or comparative studies with counterinsurgency cases in other countries. This is expected to enrich the understanding of counterinsurgency practices in the context of asymmetric warfare.

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