



THE IMPACT OF THE HOSTAGE-TAKING OF CAPTAIN PHILIP MEHRTENS ON INDONESIA–NEW ZEALAND BILATERAL RELATIONS

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Submission: January 30, 2026 | Revised: April 27, 2026 | Accepted: April 28, 2026

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana dampak hubungan bilateral antara Indonesia dan Selandia Baru pada tahun 2023 sampai saat ini. Pemilihan tahun tersebut disebabkan oleh penyanderaan Kapten Philip Mehrtens, warga negara Selandia Baru yang berprofesi sebagai pilot di maskapai penerbangan Susi Air di Kabupaten Nduga, Provinsi Papua Pegunungan. Penyanderaan ini dilakukan oleh Tentara Pembebasan Nasional Papua Barat (TPNPB) yang dipimpin oleh Sebby Sambom. Metode penelitian yang digunakan yaitu metode kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus serta menggunakan teori konflik dan konsep kerja sama bilateral. Hasil temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa hubungan bilateral antara Indonesia dan Selandia Baru memiliki tingkat ketahanan yang tinggi sehingga tidak mengganggu kerja sama ekonomi, energi, pendidikan, dan keamanan. Faktor-faktor ini disebabkan oleh penghormatan penuh pemerintah Selandia Baru terhadap Indonesia, mutual trust antarnegara yang sudah terbangun sejak tahun 1958, dan penyelesaian sandera melalui pendekatan non-militer yang melibatkan aktor lokal seperti tokoh agama, tokoh adat, dan pemerintah setempat.

Kata kunci: Philip Mehrtens, Penyanderaan, Hubungan Bilateral, Indonesia, Selandia Baru

ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to examine the impact of the bilateral relationship between Indonesia and New Zealand (NZ) from 2023 to the present. The selection of this timeframe is due to a hostage-taking incident carried out by Captain Philip Mehrtens, an NZ citizen working as a pilot for Susi Air in Nduga Regency, Papua Pegunungan Province. This hostage-taking was carried out by the West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB) under the leadership of Sebby Sambom. The research method employed is qualitative, utilizing a case study design, and incorporates conflict theory and the concept of bilateral cooperation. The study's finding is that the bilateral relationship between Indonesia and NZ is characterized by a high degree of resilience, which does not impede cooperation in economic, energy, education, and security domains. These factors, caused by the recognition of the government of NZ for Indonesia's sovereignty over the Papua region, mutual trust between Indonesia and NZ since 1958, and the release of hostage using a non-military approach involving negotiations with local actors such as religious leaders, customary leaders, and local government.

Keywords: Philip Mehrtens, Hostage-Taking, Bilateral Relations, Indonesia, New Zealand

BACKGROUND

Bilateral relations between the Republic of Indonesia and New Zealand (NZ) have been strong since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1958. Since then, embassies have been established in each capital, Jakarta and Wellington. Over the past six decades, this diplomatic relationship has been marked by strategic partnerships in several areas, including trade, with key commodities such as dairy products, beef, and agricultural and manufactured goods. In the field of education, NZ has become one of the most popular destinations for Indonesian students, particularly through the NZ Scholarships program. Meanwhile, in renewable energy, the two countries have developed more specific cooperation, especially in geothermal energy, where NZ contributes by sharing technology and technical expertise to support Indonesia's green energy transition. In terms of security and counterterrorism, both countries actively cooperate through the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC) and conduct intelligence exchanges to maintain stability in the Indo-Pacific region. However, the relationship between the two countries has also experienced diplomatic tension following the hostage-taking of a Susi Air pilot, Captain Philip Mehrtens, an NZ citizen, by the West Papua National Liberation Army (*Tentara Pembebasan Nasional Papua Barat/TPNPB*), also known as an Armed Criminal Group (*Kelompok Kriminal Bersenjata/KKB*). This group is considered a separatist movement, as it seeks independence from the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (*Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia/NKRI*).

The hostage-taking of Mehrtens has since become an international issue and has been widely reported in local media such as *Jubi.id*, *Suara Papua*, and *Cenderawasih Pos*, as well as in international media, since February 7, 2024. The issue began with the hostage-taking and the burning of a Susi Air Pilatus Porter PC-6/PK-BVY aircraft at Paro District Airport, Nduga Regency, Highland Papua Province, Indonesia (CNN Indonesia, 2023). At the time of the incident, it was openly acknowledged by the

spokesperson of the KKB, Sebby Sambom, that the group had taken Mehrtens hostage. The hostage-taking was carried out as a form of threat and pressure against the Indonesian government to respond to the TPNPB's aspiration for independence from the NKRI. In addition to demands for independence, there were also other demands, such as the closure of all flight routes into Nduga Regency by the Government of Indonesia and the complete halt of all development activities carried out by the Indonesian government in the Ndugama region (Ridhwan, 2023). This situation has undoubtedly become problematic for both the Indonesian and NZ governments, as it involves the security of a foreign national being used as a tool to advance the political interests of the organization.

This incident is particularly significant because it goes beyond mere criminality. It is evident that Mehrtens was used as a bargaining tool by the KKB to pressure the Indonesian government to respond to their demands for Papuan independence. The hostage-taking can also be seen as part of the internationalization of the Papua issue, as the international community, through global media, has once again debated human rights concerns and the armed conflict in Papua on the world stage. Moreover, the incident has placed both Indonesia and NZ in a dilemma, as they must balance internal political pressures with respect for sovereignty and the security measures undertaken by each country.

Sambom, along with other members of the TPNPB, explicitly politicized the hostage situation by demanding Papuan independence from Indonesia as a non-negotiable condition for Mehrtens' release. In addition, the TPNPB or KKB has called for the involvement of third parties from international organizations, including the United Nations (UN), to mediate the Papua conflict (Karmini and McLay, 2024). Given this situation, Indonesia's international image becomes crucial. The global community will assess whether Indonesia is able to project a positive image or whether a negative perception will emerge based on its security strategy in comprehensively resolving the

hostage crisis. The resolution process of this incident will also affect the continuity of cooperation between Indonesia and NZ.

Various efforts and responses undertaken by the NZ government in this situation, as stated by Foreign Minister Winston Peters in Radio New Zealand (2023), indicate that “New Zealand continues to work with all parties on securing Mr. Mehrtens’s safe release.” This response shows that the NZ government has voiced its support and is working alongside the Indonesian government to act swiftly and resolve the case effectively. This is further reinforced by a bilateral meeting between Vice President Ma’ruf Amin and NZ Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, which signaled Indonesia’s commitment to securing the hostage’s release while prioritizing the pilot’s safety through persuasive means (Wakil Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2024). These efforts are expected to resolve the issue by achieving a win-win solution that benefits both countries. The Indonesian government’s response includes the establishment of the Operation Damai Cartenz 2024 Task Force, which prioritizes a soft approach rather than a hard approach. This strategy involves engaging religious leaders, church figures, customary leaders, and close family members of Egianus Kogoya, with the aim of minimizing casualties among security personnel and civilians while ensuring the safety of the pilot (IndonesiaWatch.id, 2024). This study is important as it seeks to examine: “How does the hostage-taking of Captain Philip Mehrtens impact Indonesia-NZ bilateral relations?”

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper employs a theory of conflict and the concept of bilateral cooperation. In addition, this research draws on relevant literature concerning cases of hostage-taking involving individuals or foreign nationals, such as the abduction of Indonesian crew members in the Philippines by the Abu Sayyaf Group, as well as the hostage case of Mehrtens in Papua.

Relevant Existing Studies

Relevant studies on the impact of diplomacy between Indonesia and NZ in responding to the hostage-taking of Mehrtens cannot be separated from the foundational ideas of classical conflict theory, which have evolved into more complex analyses of modern diplomacy. It begins with an understanding of conflict as arising from conscious opposition between groups pursuing incompatible goals (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 1981). This is evident in the Papua context, where there is a clear internal clash between the Indonesian government, which seeks to maintain the sovereignty of the NKRI, and the independence demands of the TPNPB. In other words, this reflects a rebellion within a state attempting to overthrow the government in order to separate from state authority. This internal conflict has expanded into the international sphere due to the involvement of foreign actors. In line with the thinking of Michael Brown (2003), through the concept of transnational conflict, the hostage-taking of Mehrtens has evolved into a transnational issue. Both countries have sought to avoid infringing upon each other's sovereignty in handling the resolution of this case. As both nations prioritize cooperation to preserve their bilateral relations, Robert Keohane (2006) explains through neoliberal institutionalism that cooperation can persist even amid threats, conflict, or anarchy. This is further supported by institutions, particularly the state, and the interdependence between the two countries. Rulof, as cited in Frei (1985), reinforces this idea through the principle of reciprocity between Indonesia and NZ, as reflected in the Plan of Action agreement aimed at mitigating security tensions.

Another study by Permita (2024), titled *Framing Analysis of News Coverage on the Susi Air Pilot by the KKB in Republika*, focuses on media analysis. This study examines how Republika frames the hostage-taking of the Susi Air pilot as part of a separatist demand for independence from Indonesia. Several reports on the platform highlight acts of terror and efforts to use Mehrtens as a tool to advance the group's ideological agenda of establishing an independent state separate from Indonesia.

Through this research, it can be seen that the hostage-taking of Mehrtens is not merely a physical act, but also involves hard diplomacy and an ideological struggle aimed at pressuring both governments. Indonesia and NZ are thus tested in managing public perception and addressing threats from non-state actors in the era of technology and information, in order to maintain the resilience of their diplomatic relations.

This is followed by a study conducted by Joshua and Sidik (2021) on the diplomacy of the Sukma Foundation, which was established in 2005 by Media Group, in negotiating the release of Indonesian hostages in Southern Philippines. The study focuses on the multitrack diplomacy strategy employed by the foundation to directly secure the release of the hostages. The actors involved included local communities, and the foundation engaged in direct communication with the Abu Sayyaf Group. Following successful communication, negotiation efforts were carried out through cultural, religious, and educational approaches. As is known, Abu Sayyaf is recognized as a terrorist group with an ideology that differs from that of the Philippine government, with one of its objectives being the establishment of an Islamic government in Southern Philippines. Ultimately, the Sukma Foundation succeeded in securing the release of 10 Indonesian hostages, crew members of the tugboat Brahma 12 and the barge Anand 12, who were freed in front of the Sulu Governor's residence and subsequently flown back to Indonesia.

Finally, a study written by Zain et al. (2024) examines the application of positive law to the crime of hostage-taking involving foreign nationals in Indonesia. This research focuses more on the legal aspect, using the case of the hostage-taking of Mehrtens as a foreign national in Indonesia. It is reflected in regulatory frameworks such as Law No. 5 of 2018 (amending Law No. 15 of 2003 on the stipulation of Government Regulation in Lieu of Law) and Article 451 of Law No. 1 of 2023 concerning the Criminal Code. Although the findings indicate that the Indonesian government already has specific regulations regarding hostage-taking, there remain

shortcomings, particularly the absence of provisions addressing cases where the victim is a foreign national.

Based on the review of these studies, it can be seen that previous research has primarily focused on purely legal aspects or one-directional negotiation strategies. Moreover, earlier studies differ significantly in terms of communication or media perspectives, such as the framing of news coverage on the hostage-taking of Mehrtens. Additionally, there are differences in case studies, such as the hostage-taking of 10 Indonesian crew members by the Abu Sayyaf Group in Southern Philippines, which emphasizes political aspects through negotiation by the Sukma Foundation, as well as legal studies focusing on the application of law in hostage cases involving foreign nationals. In contrast to previous studies, this research seeks to fill the gap by analyzing the impact of the hostage-taking of Mehrtens on the resilience of Indonesia-NZ bilateral relations, particularly in the context of transnational security pressures and the commitment of both countries to maintaining diplomatic relations and cooperation.

Conflict Theory

Definitions of conflict theory from several academics and experts in international relations are used to analyze the hostage-taking of Mehrtens by the KKB. As proposed by James Dougherty and Robert Pfaltzgraff (1981), two prominent American scholars of international relations known for their book, *Contending Theories of International Relations* (1971), conflict generally refers to a condition in which a group of people (identifiable by ethnicity, language, culture, religion, socio-economic background, or other factors) consciously opposes one or more other groups because they are perceived to be pursuing incompatible goals. Meanwhile, according to Michael E. Brown (2003), a leading scholar in international security and internal conflict, conflict in international relations can be categorized into three forms: inter-

state conflicts, intra-state conflicts, and transnational conflicts. In contrast, Juliet Kaarbo and James Ray (2011) classify international conflict into two categories: interstate wars (wars between states) and intra-state wars (civil wars within a state). Interstate wars generally involve disputes or conflicts between two or more countries, often within alliances, such as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Meanwhile, intra-state wars refer to conflicts occurring within a state, including rebellions by groups seeking to overthrow a particular government.

Based on these classifications, it can be concluded that the conflict in Indonesia is an intra-state conflict that has escalated into a transnational issue. This aligns with the argument of Brown (2003), where the involvement of foreign nationals, which is, in this case, an NZ citizen, triggers the involvement of external state actors within another country's sovereign territory (Indonesia). Such an intra-state conflict may compel both the Indonesian and NZ governments to adopt careful crisis management strategies to maintain the stability of their cooperative partnership.

Furthermore, although the conflict originates domestically, it can evolve into a transnational issue due to its broader impacts, such as the involvement of international actors, refugee flows, and cross-border militia activities, which can draw the attention of neighboring countries and even the global community. The development of the TPNPB demonstrates not only resistance through soft diplomacy, such as media campaigns that gain international sympathy, but also through hard actions. A current example is the hostage-taking of Mehrtens and the burning of Susi Air aircraft by the TPNPB, with demands aimed at pressuring the Indonesian government to grant independence to Papua.

The Concept of Bilateral Cooperation

This study employs the concept of cooperation to demonstrate that peace can be achieved through rational interaction, whereby transnational conflicts can be

effectively managed and resolved through comprehensive institutional cooperation mechanisms. According to Keohane (2006), an International Relations scholar known for his role in developing the theory of neoliberal institutionalism, cooperation occurs when actors adjust their behavior to the actual or anticipated preferences of others through processes of policy coordination. This form of cooperation contains two key elements: the behavior of each actor is directed toward shared goals, and it provides mutual benefits or rewards to the parties involved. Meanwhile, Frei (1985) distinguishes international cooperation into two basic approaches. *First*, the public choice approach, where the behavior of international actors (states, international organizations, and multinational corporations) is understood as efforts to maximize their respective utilities and functions within certain constraints and considerations. *Second*, the public goods approach, which focuses on explaining particular types of cooperation and participation that arise in international relations, even when there are no clear or tangible benefits expected by the participating states.

Furthermore, Rulof, as cited in Frei (1985), adds the biopolitical approach to understanding international cooperation. This approach emphasizes that principles of reciprocity and altruistic behavior can foster stable cooperative relationships among members within a system, including the international system. According to K. J. Holsti (1981), international cooperation can emerge due to the following factors:

- a. The view that two or more interests, values, or goals that converge can be achieved, promoted, or fulfilled simultaneously by all parties.
- b. The expectation of one state that the policies adopted by another state will help it achieve its own interests and values.
- c. Agreements or specific issues between two or more states aimed at utilizing shared interests or managing conflicting interests.
- d. Formal or informal rules governing future transactions to achieve common objectives.

e. Interstate transactions conducted to fulfill shared goals.

One form of such cooperation is bilateral cooperation, in which both countries apply the principle of reciprocity. For example, Indonesia provides market access and security for foreign nationals, in this case, NZ citizens, while NZ offers support through technology and recognition of Indonesia's sovereignty. If one party violates this reciprocal arrangement, it may disrupt the stability of the system and the cooperative principles between the two countries. Perwita and Yani (2005) outline several patterns in bilateral relations, particularly in terms of state action-reaction dynamics: (a) stimulus or policy initiated by one state, (b) perception of that stimulus by decision-makers in the receiving state, (c) response or counteraction by the receiving state, and (d) perception of that response by decision-makers in the initiating state. In relation to this study, the concept of bilateral relations is used to explicitly examine the hostage-taking of Mehrtens, an NZ citizen, by the TPNPB and its impact on Indonesia-NZ bilateral cooperation. This incident can be analyzed by assessing whether it strengthens or weakens bilateral relations across various sectors such as the economy, education, energy, and security. Additionally, it aims to analyze the interaction patterns between Indonesia and NZ through the action-reaction dynamics between the two countries.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative method with a case study design. It aims to produce an in-depth and accurate analysis of the impact of the hostage-taking of Mehrtens on Indonesia-NZ bilateral relations. This method is chosen because it allows for the exploration of the complexity of contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts. As noted by John W. Creswell (2007), qualitative research has the strength to explore the meanings held by individuals and specific social groups, present narratives, and provide complex descriptions and interpretations of particular issues.

Through the case study of the hostage-taking, the data will be analyzed by examining patterns of diplomatic communication between NZ and Indonesia. This qualitative research will also employ content analysis or discourse analysis of official statements from both sides, including those from Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and from NZ, such as statements by Foreign Minister Winston Peters and Prime Minister Christopher Luxon.

The data collection technique in this study relies on secondary data, including official government documents such as press releases, press conference transcripts, and media statements issued by Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia/TNI*), the Indonesian National Police (*Kepolisian Negara Republik Indonesia/Polri*), NZ's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), and the Office of the Prime Minister of NZ. This is complemented by reports from credible media sources, including news articles and investigative reports from national and local outlets (such as Kompas, CNN, Tempo, Metro TV, and others) as well as international media (such as Radio New Zealand and Xinhua). Additional sources include academic journals related to the hostage-taking of Mehtens in Papua. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the question of "how" a specific security incident, which is the hostage-taking of a foreign pilot, can affect bilateral relations between Indonesia and NZ.

DISCUSSION

Chronology of the Hostage-Taking of Captain Philip Mehtens

The hostage-taking of Mehtens, who was flying a Susi Air aircraft of the Pilatus Porter PC-6/PK-BVY type, began when the aircraft lost contact at Paro Airport on Tuesday, 7 February 2023 (Muhid, 2024). The aircraft, registered as PK-BVY, was carrying five passengers: Demanus Gwijangge, Minda Gwijangge, Pelenus Gwijangge, Meita Gwijangge, and an infant named Wetina W. Initially, the hostage-taking was

carried out by the TPNPB, also known as the KKB, which is considered a separatist movement with the ideology of seeking independence from the NKRI.

At the time of the incident, it was openly acknowledged by Sambom that the group had taken the pilot hostage and was responsible for the aircraft's burning (Tribratanews, 2024). The chronology of events from the hostage-taking to Mehrtens's release is outlined below:

Table 1.
Chronology of the Hostage-Taking of Captain Philip Mehrtens

Time	Event
7 February 2023	- Susi Air flight SI 9368 lost contact and was later found burned.
8 February 2023	- Five Susi Air passengers were successfully evacuated. Only the pilot remained missing.
14 February 2023	- TPNPB-OPM released photos of Philip Mehrtens and refuted a statement by TNI Commander Admiral Yudo Margono, who had claimed that the pilot was not taken hostage but had fled for safety.
	- Search operations were conducted by the TNI and Polri using aircraft, helicopters, and land routes.
20 February 2023	- A joint TNI-Polri team stated that law enforcement operations would be the last resort if negotiations failed.
February 2023 - June 2024	- Various efforts were made to secure the pilot's release, but none produced concrete results.
	- The Susi Air pilot reportedly lived among local communities and claimed to be in good condition, although communication with the outside world (such as using electronic devices) was restricted.
3 August 2024	- TPNPB-OPM announced that Egianus Kogoya had agreed to release Mehrtens. However, the Damai Cartenz Task Force doubted this claim, considering it propaganda.
5 August 2024	- Another incident occurred involving the killing of a different pilot, Glen Malcolm Conning, by the KKB, increasing pressure on efforts to secure Mehrtens's release.
15 September 2024	- TPNPB spokesperson Sebby Sambom stated that the group would release a proposal for the liberation of Mehrtens on 17 September 2024.
17 September 2024	- TPNPB-OPM published a release proposal, which stipulated that the government should not conduct military operations during the release process and must withdraw non-organic military forces from the Nduga area.
19 September 2024	- TPNPB-OPM accused TNI-Polri of attacking their base to free Mehrtens, but this claim was denied by the Indonesian government.
21 September 2024	- Mehrtens was finally released after being held hostage for approximately 20 months (nearly 1.5 years).

Source: compiled by the author from various media reports

Efforts to Secure the Release of Captain Philip Mehrstens from TPNPB

Various efforts were undertaken to secure Mehrstens's release, involving multiple stakeholders such as customary leaders, religious leaders, local communities in the area where the hostage-taking occurred, as well as religious institutions like churches. This approach aligns with the statement of Brigadier General Faizal Ramadhan, Head of Operations of the Damai Cartenz Task Force, who emphasized that the release was pursued through a soft approach, engaging religious figures, church institutions, Papuan customary leaders, and the family of Egianus Kogoya (Sabang Merauke News, 2024).

Nevertheless, Indonesia's efforts to secure the release of Mehrstens were perceived by some human rights observers as insufficiently optimal, as the government appeared to be taking a passive stance. As reported by Tempo (2024), according to human rights observer Amiruddin Al-Rahab, the responsibility for freeing the Susi Air pilot lies entirely with the Indonesian government: "In fact, it is 100 percent the responsibility of the Indonesian government to secure his release." He argued that the government should have formed a joint task force and should not have underestimated the hostage situation by assuming that it did not significantly disrupt governance dynamics.

The NZ government also pursued a diplomatic approach by cooperating with the Indonesian government through coordination and intensive communication with third parties, such as representatives of the National Human Rights Commission in Jayapura, to ensure Mehrstens's safety. At the same time, NZ demonstrated caution in supporting Indonesia, given the sensitivity of the Papua issue, which has increasingly gained international attention, particularly regarding independence claims voiced by the TPNPB group. This cautious stance was taken to avoid triggering further tensions in Papua, as the issue is considered an internal matter of Indonesia and not subject to intervention by the NZ government.

Ultimately, the prolonged negotiation process yielded positive signals for the release of Mehrtens. On 21 September 2024, he was released in Yuguru Village and picked up by a joint TNI-Polri team through the Damai Cartenz Task Force (Metro TV News, 2024). Positive responses were expressed by the Indonesian government, particularly President Joko Widodo and officials from the TNI/Polri, who conveyed appreciation to all parties involved, including customary leaders, church figures, and others who contributed to the release. As stated by Widodo, the release of Mehrtens from KKB captivity was the result of a very long negotiation process carried out without repressive measures (Tribatanews, 2024). A similar stance was taken by the NZ government, which supported efforts to secure the captain's release through peaceful and negotiated means. This is reflected in statements from the MFAT, communicated by then-Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta, who firmly requested guarantees for the safety of her citizens. This request implicitly conveyed to the Indonesian government the importance of refraining from excessive use of military force or a hard approach, which could endanger the hostage.

The Impact of the Hostage-Taking of Captain Philip Mehrtens on Indonesia-NZ Bilateral Relations

The hostage-taking of Mehrtens has undoubtedly had implications for Indonesia-NZ bilateral relations. The potential for short-term tensions arising from the incident could occur, particularly when viewed from the perspectives of crisis management and state sovereignty, as it concerns the security of a country's citizens abroad, being used as leverage for the political interests of the TPNPB organization. If not properly managed, this incident could affect several aspects, such as a decline in mutual trust between the two countries in the long term. Globally, Indonesia has also come under increased scrutiny regarding the Papua issue, especially in terms of security conditions in the region. In today's global environment, which is shaped by

the hegemony of social media, such incidents are likely to be perceived as threats, as they can disrupt diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Implementation of the Action-Reaction Pattern in Indonesia–NZ Bilateral Relations Regarding the Hostage of Captain Philip Mehrtens

The hostage-taking of Mehrtens did not affect tensions between the two countries, as both nations were committed to maintaining good bilateral relations and respecting each other's sovereignty. This can be analyzed within the framework of the action-reaction patterns in Indonesia–NZ bilateral relations regarding the hostage-taking, as outlined by Perwita and Yani (2025).

First, a stimulus or policy initiated by one state. The hostage-taking of Mehrtens led the initiating country, NZ, to implement an actual policy known as the “whole-of-government” strategy, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Beehive, 2024). The initial actions taken by the NZ government regarding this issue included an official request to the Indonesian government to ensure the hostage's safety and facilitate his release through a “soft approach” or peaceful resolution. Subsequently, the NZ government proactively offered technical assistance and diplomatic mediation to resolve the conflict. Then, the dispatch of a consular team and the assignment of a special diplomat from Wellington, supported by the NZ Embassy in Jakarta, to coordinate directly with the Indonesian government. One crucial aspect of the NZ government's initiative is the explicit recognition of Indonesia's sovereignty over Papua through a statement by Ambassador Kevin Jeffrey Burnet, and this matter is fully entrusted to the Indonesian government (Republika, 2024). This step is a highly significant initiative to build trust in the Indonesian government's capacity to ensure the safety of its citizens' interests.

Second, the perception of that stimulus by decision-makers in the receiving state. For Indonesia, the initiative from the NZ government was responded to by relevant

actors, namely decision-makers, regarding the case of pilot Mehrtens's hostage situation. These actors included Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, who responded by stating that the hostage's release was achieved through a persuasive approach and by ensuring consular access for the NZ Embassy in Jakarta (CNN Indonesia, 2024). Additionally, on the sidelines of the ASEAN international forum in Vientiane in July 2024, Marsudi and Winston Peters held a special bilateral meeting to discuss developments in the hostage release efforts (Antara News, 2024). Furthermore, this response was supported by the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs and the Commander of the TNI in handling the hostage situation internally, with operations conducted primarily under domestic law rather than as an international armed conflict. Both responses from the Indonesian government indicate that Indonesia supports coordination with the NZ government and seeks to take persuasive measures while relying on the capabilities of Indonesia's domestic security apparatus without foreign intervention.

Third, response or counteraction by the receiving state. The action taken by the Indonesian government was to form Operation Damai Cartenz, a joint TNI-Polri task force that prioritizes a soft approach rather than repressive military force. This approach involves local actors such as Nduga Regent Edison Gwijangge, religious leaders, and customary leaders to conduct underground negotiations with Egianus Kogoya (Kompas, 2024). The Indonesian government also established intensive communication channels with the Indonesian Embassy in NZ to provide regular updates and information. As a result, on September 21, 2024, after 19 months, Mehrtens was released unharmed and officially handed over to the NZ government in Jakarta.

Fourth, the perception of that response by decision-makers in the initiating state. For NZ, as the initiating country, Indonesia's response was perceived as responsible, professional, and successful in securing the hostage's release. This was evident in the

NZ government's public expression of relief and gratitude toward the Indonesian government, the TNI, the Polri, and traditional leaders (Beehive, 2024). Furthermore, the success of this rescue was marked by the presentation of an award to TNI Chief of Staff Richard Tampubolon by NZ Ambassador Philip Nathan Taula for his role in the pilot's rescue in April 2026 (Warta Ekonomi, 2026). This action constitutes official recognition of Indonesia's defense capabilities and signals an enhancement of bilateral cooperation in the fields of defense and security in the Pacific region.

The Implications of the Hostage-Taking of Captain Philip Mehrtens on Indonesia–NZ Bilateral Relations

The impact of the hostage-taking incident demonstrates that bilateral relations between Indonesia and NZ were not disrupted; rather, the situation revealed the maturity and resilience of their partnership. This is clearly reflected in the 11th and 12th Indonesia-NZ Joint Ministerial Commission meetings, where the hostage situation was addressed as a key security issue while formal agendas on trade, renewable energy, and counterterrorism cooperation continued to be discussed (Beehive, 2025). These meetings indicate that the Mehrtens incident was successfully resolved without generating new disputes or damaging diplomatic relations between the two countries. Another key finding is the high level of resilience in the economic relationship between the two countries. Trade data from 2023 and 2024 show stable trade volumes, with NZ's exports to Indonesia dominated by dairy products, an essential input for Indonesia's food industry. The value of dairy exports reached approximately USD 463 million in 2023. Conversely, Indonesia's main exports to NZ, such as animal feed (vegetable residues), amounted to around USD 191 million (OEC World, 2023). Data on the stability of the Indonesia-NZ trade balance can be seen in the following table.

Table 2.
Indonesia's Trade Balance During the Hostage-Taking of Captain Philip Mehrstens

No	Economic Indicator	2023 (Peak of the Hostage Crisis)	2024 (Resolution of the Hostage Release)	Trend
1	Total Bilateral Trade	NZ\$ 3.68 billion	NZ\$ 2.99 billion	Stable
2	Trade Partner Ranking (for NZ)	12th	11th	Increasing
3	NZ's Main Exports to Indonesia	Milk, butter, cheese	Milk, butter, cheese	Unaffected
4	Tourist Arrivals	Stable (Bali remains popular)	Increasing	Recovering post-pandemic

Source: MFAT (2025)

The data above indicate that the hostage-taking of Mehrstens did not have an adverse impact on Indonesia-NZ bilateral relations in the trade sector. The trends show no decline or disruption in exports; in fact, Indonesia remains an important partner for NZ, particularly in the livestock sector, while Bali continues to be a popular tourist destination for NZ visitors.

In addition to economic relations, there is also development assistance provided by the NZ government to Indonesia. Data show that NZ contributed NZ\$ 15.7 million to geothermal energy development through the Indonesia-Aotearoa New Zealand Geothermal Energy Programme on 31 July 2024 (Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2024). Similarly, in the field of education, support is provided through the Manaaki New Zealand Scholarships, which offer funding for master's and doctoral studies. In addition, there are thematic short courses such as New Zealand Education and Language Training Organisation (NZELTO), Renewable Energy, Disaster Risk Reduction for Resilience, and Public Sector Leadership. These scholarship programs, administered by the MFAT, have been ongoing for a long time and were not interrupted during the hostage-taking incident involving Mehrstens. Furthermore, NZ's commitment to supporting development in Eastern Indonesia is reflected in targeted short-course scholarships under the INSPIRASI Programme, which focuses on regions such as Papua, West Papua, Maluku, West Nusa Tenggara, and East Nusa

Tenggara. The objective of these educational initiatives is to support development in Indonesia and enhance the capacity of its human resources.

Beyond economic and development cooperation, the hostage incident also reinforced the existing security partnership between the two countries, particularly within the framework of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism cooperation. This is evidenced by the strengthened commitment of both countries and continued follow-up meetings, including the second Indonesia-NZ Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism held in Wellington in May 2024. The agenda of this meeting included discussions on developments in domestic terrorism and violent extremism threats, priorities for addressing them, progress in bilateral cooperation, and regional and multilateral priorities (Tribatanews, 2024). The meeting involved Indonesia's National Counterterrorism Agency and NZ's MFAT. This cooperation framework includes intelligence sharing, prevention of digital radicalization, and capacity-building and personnel training initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The hostage-taking of Mehrtens, which lasted for approximately one year and seven months, serves as a significant indicator for both Indonesia and NZ that, despite the incident, the two countries remained committed to maintaining their diplomatic relations. Thus, rather than undermining bilateral cooperation, the situation actually strengthened the partnership between the two nations. Both countries were able to isolate this highly sensitive security issue (the hostage-taking) to prevent it from spilling over and damaging other vital pillars of their relationship, such as economic cooperation (trade), education, energy, and security. Available data further demonstrate that the flow of trade and services remained stable and was not adversely affected by the political tensions surrounding the hostage situation involving Mehrtens.

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