

Playing Second Fiddle
—
Australia's Strategic Policy towards the East
Timor Issue, 1998 - 1999

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Certifying Statement

I, Iain HENRY, certify that:

- this sub-thesis is a piece of original work,
- all sources have been fully cited, and
- the sub-thesis has not been submitted for any other qualification.

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Abstract

The deployment of an Australian-led peacekeeping force to East Timor in September 1999 was arguably the most significant strategic decision faced by an Australian government since the Second World War. The operation posed a grave risk of military conflict with Indonesia, strained the Australia-US relationship and redefined Asian perceptions of Australia.

It is therefore important to examine how this scenario arose. Data obtained in thirteen interviews with key Australian decision-makers has revealed new information about Australia's strategic policy throughout 1998-1999. Despite having advocated an internal political settlement that would have legitimised Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor, Australia accepted Indonesia's decision to conduct a self-determination ballot in East Timor as a *fait accompli*. From this point on Australia's policy was largely reactive, working not to promote nor prevent independence but rather to ensure that the ballot was credible and accompanied by minimal violence. These efforts had to be delicately balanced against Australia's primary strategic objectives – Indonesia's democratic progress and the development of the bilateral relationship.

Managing these conflicting objectives throughout 1999 was a significant challenge for Australia. Despite the severe violence that occurred after the ballot, Australia's strategic policy was managed in an adroit manner that prioritised the most important objectives and avoided worst-case outcomes. Given Australia's limited strategic options throughout 1998 and 1999, this is not an insignificant achievement.

However glorious an action in itself, it ought not to pass for great if it be not the effect of wisdom and intention.

- François de La Rochefoucauld

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Introduction

This sub-thesis examines Australia's strategic policy towards the East Timor Issue from January 1998 until the deployment of the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) in September 1999. By considering the "East Timor Issue", this work goes beyond the status of East Timor to also consider the Australia-Indonesia relationship and the nexus between this relationship and Australia's strategic policy towards East Timor. It identifies, contextualises and analyses the influences on—and outcomes of—Australia's strategic policy. For necessary reasons of brevity, this work is not a complete history of 1998-1999 and does not provide a thorough analysis of Indonesia's approach to the East Timor Issue, nor does it provide a detailed technical examination of policymaking processes in Australia.¹ This study focuses solely on strategic policy at the highest levels of the Australian Government.

Existing literature

Unsurprisingly, a number of accounts of Australia's approach to the East Timor Issue have already been written. The boundaries of this literature are typified by two hypotheses: that Australia either deliberately worked to achieve East Timorese independence, or attempted to prevent independence by providing the Indonesian military an opportunity to subvert the act of self-determination conducted in August 1999. In *March of the Patriots* a prominent Australian journalist, Paul Kelly, suggests that Australia's political leaders deliberately worked to achieve East Timorese independence² – something he has separately described as a 'covert East Timor independence plan'.³ The other position is explicated in 'The Road to INTERFET: Bringing the Politics Back In', by Clinton

¹ For an excellent analysis of the procedural aspects of Australian policymaking concerning East Timor, see Connery, David, *Crisis Policymaking: Australia and the East Timor crisis of 1999*, Canberra ACT: ANU E Press, 2010.

² Kelly, Paul, *March of the Patriots – the Struggle for Modern Australia*, Melbourne VIC: Melbourne University Press, 2009.

³ Kelly, Paul, 'John Howard's covert East Timor independence plan', *The Australian*, 05 September 2009.

Fernandes, a former Australian Army intelligence analyst.⁴ In this article, Fernandes argues that the Australian Government strived to ensure East Timor's incorporation into Indonesia through deliberate inaction and a determination to avoid a peacekeeping force – until domestic political pressure forced their hands.

Another account, 'The Road to INTERFET' by Hugh White, a former senior official in the Department of Defence, takes a middle path between these two narratives.⁵ However, given the article's authorship it considers the East Timor Issue from a very Defence-centric view, sometimes neglecting the perspectives of other Australian Government departments.

Methodology

This sub-thesis approaches the East Timor Issue from a historical perspective, providing a detailed account of Australia's strategic policy. Although this study is constrained by the fact that many of the official documents concerning the East Timor Issue will only be declassified and released under the *Archives Act* in 2020, two official publications sponsored by the Australian Government contain a number of complete primary sources, as well as numerous excerpts and quotes from official documents.⁶

While the sub-thesis draws extensively on publically available sources such as books, articles and media reports, it also uses data obtained in thirteen interviews with those intimately involved in forming Australian policy, including former Prime Minister John Howard and former Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. Several former senior public servants—as well as a former Ministerial Adviser and the then Chief of the Australian Defence Force—were also interviewed. These interviews provided perspectives and retrospectives that are very unlikely to be captured in official documentation and which might no longer

⁴ Fernandes, Clinton, 'The Road to INTERFET: Bringing the Politics Back In', *Security Challenges*, 4:3, Spring 2008, pp.83-98.

⁵ White, Hugh, 'The Road to INTERFET: Reflections on Australian Strategic Decisions Concerning East Timor, December 1998-September 1999', *Security Challenges*, 4:1, Autumn 2008, pp. 69-87.

⁶ Although recent changes to the *Archives Act* mean that the open access period will now begin in 2020 instead of 2030, it remains possible that some documents—or parts thereof—will not be released due to concerns about national security and/or Australia's diplomatic relationships.

be available in 2020.⁷ With all interviews conducted in the first half of 2012, the events of 1998-1999 were sufficiently distant to allow some retrospection, but not too far-gone to prevent a reasonable degree of recollection. Through this research project a significant and contestable dataset was obtained.⁸

Using this data, in conjunction with other sources, this sub-thesis examines:

- Australia's strategic objectives throughout 1998 and 1999,
- the change of Australia's East Timor policy, communicated to the Indonesian President through the "Howard Letter",
- Australia's attempts to reduce violence in East Timor,
- Australia's consideration of a pre-ballot peacekeeping force, and
- the assembly and deployment of a multi-national peacekeeping force, including the management of the Australia-US relationship.

Each chapter of this study analyses a discrete chronological period, during which Australia's strategic objectives—or the means used to pursue these objectives—changed in response to events in East Timor or Indonesia.

This analysis shows that Australia's strategic policy throughout this period was usually reactive, often driven by a desire to avoid certain scenarios. Most prominently, in January 1999 Indonesia decided to conduct an act of self-determination for East Timor. This bold decision was quickly accepted by Australian decision makers as a *fait accompli* and this acquiescence established a rhythm of reactive Australian policy focussed on managing consequences and avoiding worst-case outcomes.

Throughout 1999, violence in East Timor—in conjunction with the political situation in Indonesia—regularly placed the Australian Government in difficult diplomatic positions, with limited response options. In this context, Australia's

⁷ For example, Ashton Calvert—who, as Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, was a significant participant in forming Australia's strategic policy—passed away in 2007.

⁸ The author has approached the interview data carefully, with full cognisance of the perils of oral history. See, for example, Harrison, Brian, 'Oral History and Recent Political History', *Oral History*, 1:3, 1972, pp. 30-48 and Stille, Alexander, 'Prospecting for Truth in the Ore of Memory', *The New York Times*, 10 March 2001. Where possible, accounts have been corroborated with either primary sources or several interviewee perspectives. Where significant discrepancies exist, these have been noted.

primary challenge throughout 1999 was ensuring that strategic policy appropriately prioritised the most important objectives – encouraging Indonesia’s developing democracy and maintaining the Australia-Indonesia bilateral relationship.

This account presents an original perspective on Australia’s strategic policy, based on new information sourced during a series of wide-ranging interviews. It provides the “Whole of Government” aspect lacking in White’s article, while offering an alternative to the grand and Machiavellian narratives of Kelly and Fernandes, respectively. It argues that a comprehensive but nuanced analysis of Australia’s objectives, decisions and actions throughout 1998-1999 demonstrates that Australia’s strategic policy was usually reactive, with policy options constrained by the need to prioritise Australia’s most important objectives. Based on this assessment, the sub-thesis closes with some conclusions about the efficacy of Australia’s strategic policy during this period.

Chapter 1

A search for stability as Suharto falls (January – June 1998)

Background

In 1975, following the retreat of Portugal as the colonial power, Indonesian military forces invaded East Timor and the territory was formally incorporated into Indonesia in 1976. Although Australia officially recognised Indonesia's sovereignty over East Timor in 1978, most of the international community regarded the occupation as illegal – only a small minority of nations recognised Indonesian rule, which was often violently enforced by the Indonesian military.⁹ Despite domestic opposition to Australia's position from human rights groups and the Catholic Church, Australia's support for Indonesian sovereignty was maintained over many years and several changes of Government.

In 1998, the relationship with Indonesia was widely perceived to be one of Australia's most important bilateral relationships. Partly because of its position as an archipelagic screen to the North of Australia, in 1997 Indonesia was officially described as a 'key determinant of Australia's security in the years ahead'.¹⁰ Although Indonesia's violent governance of East Timor was a long-term irritant to the bilateral relationship between Indonesia and Australia, both sides of Australian politics steadfastly supported Indonesian rule in East Timor, believing it to be a necessary cost of good relations with Jakarta. Australia's then-Prime Minister, John Howard, believed the 'bipartisan constant was that nothing was to get in the way of smooth relations between Australia and Indonesia'.¹¹

Australia's national interest

Accordingly, in early 1998 Australian strategic policy towards the East Timor Issue was focussed not on Dili, but Jakarta. Australia's primary objectives were

⁹ See Edwards, Peter and Goldsworthy, David, *Facing North: a century of Australian engagement with Asia*, Melbourne VIC: Melbourne University Press, 2004, pp.216-219.

¹⁰ Commonwealth of Australia, *Australia's Strategic Policy*, Canberra ACT: Department of Defence, 1997, p.12.

¹¹ Howard, John, *Lazarus Rising*, Sydney NSW: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010, p.337.

to support the stability of President Suharto's regime and maintain good relations with Indonesia. Despite intervention from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in late 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis had led to a calamitous fiscal situation in Indonesia. Paul Wolfowitz, a former US Ambassador to Indonesia, later testified that the financial crisis was, for Indonesia, 'probably as bad as the Great Depression was in the United States'.¹²

In this context, with IMF funding critical to Indonesia's stability, Australia contributed generously through both hard cash and a lobbying effort to ensure that the IMF—under US pressure—did not deal too harshly with Indonesia.¹³ Howard's International Adviser, Michael Thawley, described this assistance as a 'very friendly gesture and one that showed we were serious about our commitment to the relationship with Indonesia'.¹⁴ In the early stages of 1998, the East Timor Issue was not a primary concern for decision-makers in Canberra – the Australian Government was focussed firmly on Jakarta and supporting the stability of the Suharto regime.

The Australian domestic angle

The longstanding bipartisan consensus—that relations with Indonesia should take priority over any concerns for East Timor—was broken in late January 1998, when the opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP) shifted its policy to claim that 'no lasting solution to the conflict in East Timor is likely in the absence of negotiation through which the people of East Timor can exercise their right of self-determination'.¹⁵ This policy change may not have been, as Clinton Fernandes argues, 'a critical factor in the independence of East Timor', but it certainly did raise the profile of the issue in Australia.¹⁶ Australia's acceptance of Indonesia's occupation had always attracted strong domestic opposition –

¹² Paul Wolfowitz, in testimony to the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, of the Committee on International Relations, US House of Representatives, 04 June 1998, p.29.

¹³ See Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p.339 and Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, pp.40-43.

¹⁴ Michael Thawley, interview with author.

¹⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor – Final Report of the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee*, Canberra ACT: Senate Printing Unit, 2000, pp.174-175. See also Dodson, Louise, 'Brereton promises improved relations with European Union', *The Australian Financial Review*, 23 January 1998.

¹⁶ Fernandes, Clinton, *Reluctant Saviour - Australia, Indonesia and the Independence of East Timor*, Melbourne VIC: Scribe Publications, 2004, p.31.

according to Australia's then-Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, East Timor 'plagued our relations with Indonesia and caused endless angst in the community'.¹⁷ As media attention on the issue intensified throughout 1998, it provided some domestic impetus for an Australian policy change.¹⁸

International influences on the East Timor Issue

Throughout this period the "Tripartite" talks between Portugal, Indonesia and the United Nations (UN) continued, with the UN representing the interests of the East Timorese. First convened in 1983, the Tripartite talks were focussed on resolving the international status of East Timor – these negotiations had waxed and waned for years, producing few tangible results. Although some Indonesian officials were keen to achieve a compromise solution involving a level of East Timorese autonomy, Suharto was hostile to anything less than full integration.¹⁹

As Indonesia's financial situation worsened in the first few months of 1998, the diplomatic talks were a sideshow compared to the growing social instability in Indonesia. Jamsheed Marker, the United Nations (UN) Secretary General's Personal Representative for East Timor, commented that working on East Timor at this time seemed akin to 'polishing the dinner silver on the Titanic'.²⁰ Australian officials were sceptical as to the value of the Tripartite talks: Hugh White, then a Deputy Secretary in the Department of Defence, assessed them as 'going through the motions'.²¹ It was clear that under Suharto little progress could be achieved by the Tripartite process - those 'who believed a new approach was inevitable would have to wait for the ageing autocrat to finally depart the palace'.²²

Despite the efforts of the IMF, the financial crisis soon precipitated significant civil unrest in Indonesia. Protest action in Jakarta escalated and on 12 May 1998, the shooting of four students protesting at Trisakti University was the beginning

¹⁷ Greenlees, Don and Garran, Robert, *Deliverance: the inside story of East Timor's fight for freedom*, Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2002, p.81.

¹⁸ Former Defence Minister John Moore, interview with author.

¹⁹ See Greenlees and Garran, *Deliverance*, pp.28-29.

²⁰ Marker, Jamsheed, *East Timor – A Memoir of the Negotiations for Independence*, Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2003, p.79.

²¹ Hugh White, interview with author. Several interviewees expressed similar sentiments.

²² Greenlees and Garran, *Deliverance*, p.30.

of the end for Suharto. As he was overseas, it was left to Vice President Bacharuddin Jusuf (B.J.) Habibie and the Indonesian military (TNI) to handle the civil unrest.²³ By the time Suharto returned to Indonesia on 15 May, many of his Ministers had concluded that his continued rule was untenable – over 1000 people had died in riots and perhaps 150 000 foreigners had fled Indonesia.²⁴ On 21 May 1998, Suharto resigned and Habibie was sworn in as the third President of the Republic of Indonesia.

Canberra reacts to the fall of Suharto

Seen from Canberra, this transition was both exciting and worrying. Habibie's Presidency offered opportunities for Indonesia – Thawley expressed a view shared by several interviewees; that Australia was focussed on 'how Indonesia would change as a country and...the prospects of economic reform and more liberal politics'.²⁵ But there was also considerable apprehension and concern about the possibility of TNI seizing control. White recalls that many intelligence assessments in this period were 'really dark'. One feasible scenario was 'a failed attempt to establish democracy and a reassertion of an authoritarian military-backed Government, possibly with widespread bloodshed. This would be a Government with which we could not deal'.²⁶

As Habibie assumed the Presidency the Australian Government was firmly focussed on maintaining a workable relationship with Indonesia, regardless of who was in power. In mid-May Howard reacted to the possibility of Suharto's departure by declaring that the bilateral relationship was 'important beyond the tenure in office of any particular individuals'.²⁷ At this time, East Timor featured in Australia's calculations only in relation to how it might hamper Indonesia's democratisation and global standing – in late May Howard commented that East Timor 'remains now a major irritant to the rest of the world, and legitimately

²³ Although the Indonesian military were known at this stage as *Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia* (ABRI) – the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia, for the sake of consistency the term *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (TNI) – Indonesian National Armed Forces—which was adopted in 1999—is used throughout this sub-thesis.

²⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor in Transition 1998-2000: An Australian Policy Challenge*, Canberra ACT: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2001, p.15.

²⁵ Michael Thawley, interview with author.

²⁶ Hugh White, interview with author.

²⁷ Barker, Geoffrey, 'Australia bends to people power', *Australian Financial Review*, 16 May 1998.

so'.²⁸ Asked if Australia should support self-determination, Howard replied that 'it would obviously be to the increased reputation of the Indonesian Government (and) it would obviously be well received if there were movements in that direction'.²⁹ Australia privately confirmed that these comments were not a shift of Australian policy and on 02 June 1998, Habibie also signalled that he would not reconsider East Timor's status.³⁰

Habibie's *volte face* – the offer of a “special status”

Habibie—almost always described as mercurial—did not share Suharto's immovable position on East Timor. In early June the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, revived a plan presented to Suharto in the mid-1990s. This proposed Indonesia granting a “special status” to East Timor, providing a degree of autonomy in exchange for international recognition of Indonesian sovereignty. Habibie and his Cabinet endorsed this proposal, perhaps because they were so preoccupied with financial and political matters 'they did not give much thought to the East Timor question'.³¹ Other scenarios—such as the possibility that Habibie might have seized an opportunity to wrest control of East Timor policy away from the TNI—hinted at the underlying civil-military tensions within the Indonesian Government.³² On 09 June 1998, Habibie surprised the international community by announcing that he was willing to consider autonomy for East Timor in exchange for international recognition of Indonesian sovereignty.³³

Canberra's reaction to Habibie's announcement was cautiously positive, although wary about the lack of detail. Unofficially, many were concerned that Habibie's action on East Timor could irritate the TNI leadership and increase the risk of a military coup. Peter Varghese, a senior official in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), later noted that this 'was a potentially

²⁸ Dow Jones Newswires, 'Australia Urges Indonesia Habibie to End East Timor Dispute', 25 May 1998.

²⁹ See Greene, Gervase, 'Howard in Freedom Call on East Timor', *The Age*, 26 May 1998.

³⁰ See Reuters News, 'Indonesia's Habibie says no change in Timor policy', 02 June 1998. See also Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.35 for Australian assurances that Howard's comments were not a policy shift.

³¹ Alatas, Ali, *The Pebble in the Shoe: the Diplomatic Struggle for East Timor*, Jakarta: Aksara Karunia, 2006, p.135.

³² See Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, pp.37-38.

³³ See Greenlees, Donald, 'Amnesty not enough for Dili', *The Australian*, 11 June 1998.

dangerous transition period and of course Habibie didn't inspire confidence at the time'.³⁴ The spectre of Indonesia's military history also hung over Habibie – White notes that 'we were surprised that he ran with it so hard, so early. It seemed to us very likely as something that would really irritate TNI'.³⁵ For Thawley, the key question was 'could Habibie actually deliver it? We tended to think of him as someone who said lots of things, had lots of good ideas, but wasn't able to deliver them – his policy freedom was very constrained'.³⁶

Australia takes an interest

Against the backdrop of economic hardship and civil-military tension the Australian Government considered East Timor to be a secondary concern, but it was acknowledged that Habibie's Presidency provided an opportunity to address an issue that had long plagued the bilateral relationship and adversely affected Indonesia's international standing. Varghese notes this view was most prevalent in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) - the 'departure of Suharto and the coming in of the new regime were seen by some, particularly in DFAT, as an opportunity to get this monkey off our back'.³⁷ Though regarded as of lesser importance than the need for political and economic reform, there was a feeling that Indonesia's movement towards a "special status" for East Timor meant continued inaction by Australia was not feasible.³⁸ Politically, Howard also felt the need to act – there was concern that with Habibie moving on East Timor, Australia could be 'left behind'.³⁹

Habibie's announcement had reinvigorated the Tripartite process, with the UN continuing to represent the East Timorese. However, the Portuguese cleaved to their longstanding position that they would not 'acknowledge publicly and in advance Indonesia's sovereignty over East Timor or that the integration of East Timor with Indonesia was final'.⁴⁰ This position clashed with Habibie's offer, which imagined autonomy as the *quid pro quo* for international recognition.

³⁴ Peter Varghese, interview with author.

³⁵ Hugh White, interview with author.

³⁶ Michael Thawley, interview with author.

³⁷ Peter Varghese, interview with author.

³⁸ See Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.486.

³⁹ John Howard, interview with author.

⁴⁰ Alatas, *The Pebble in the Shoe*, p.137.

Sceptical about the Tripartite process but cognisant of the potential presented by Habibie's offer, DFAT came to the view that the:

only chance for a lasting resolution of the East Timor problem will come about through a process of negotiation between the central government in Jakarta and the recognised representatives of the East Timorese people....if the Indonesians showed readiness to accept this approach, Australia might be able to facilitate the process.⁴¹

A new objective for Australia

In late June 1998, Australia's Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, announced he would travel to Jakarta in early July. His media release prominently highlighted how Australia sought to work with Indonesia to 'implement political and economic reform...in order to rebuild international confidence in Indonesia'. Only one sentence commented on 'the delicate issue of East Timor' and 'Australia's deep interest in seeing this problem taken forward'.⁴² However, DFAT's work had prepared a low-risk option – Downer could suggest to Alatas that Australia conduct a survey of East Timorese leaders, evaluating their responses to Habibie's offer.⁴³

Downer left for Jakarta with an agenda that reflected Australia's strategic objectives at that time – economic security was the primary concern, as it was considered the *sine qua non* of political stability, democratisation and further civil-military reform. Australian support would also affirm the importance of maintaining and strengthening the bilateral relationship between Australia and the new, democratic Indonesia – these objectives were the top priorities. However, Habibie's offer of a special status created both the room to move and the impetus for a change of Australia's East Timor policy. Although it was not a primary objective, Australia was now concerned with 'persuading the Indonesians to include the East Timorese' in their considerations of autonomy.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Diplomatic cable from Canberra to Jakarta, 23 June 1998, as quoted in Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, p.225.

⁴² Downer, Alexander, *Media Release – Visit to Jakarta, Indonesia*, 30 June 1998.

⁴³ See Garran and Greenlees, pp.81-82. See also Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, p.224.

⁴⁴ Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p.340.

Chapter 2

Challenges and opportunities for Australia (July – November 1998)

Downer's approach to Alatas

Downer visited Jakarta from 08-10 July 1998, meeting with Habibie, Alatas and the Defence Minister, General Wiranto. There are few accounts of his discussions with Indonesian leaders, but the two official publications concerning the East Timor Issue note that it was discussed in the context of Indonesia's global standing – 'the East Timor problem was harming Indonesia's international reputation, at a time when Indonesia needed all the international support it could get'.⁴⁵ In a meeting with Alatas, Downer offered Australia's help in surveying the opinion of influential East Timorese leaders, in order to discern their views on Habibie's "special status" proposal. According to John McCarthy, then Australia's Ambassador to Indonesia, Alatas 'wasn't at all keen, but eventually gave his consent'.⁴⁶

Downer's public comments during the visit were circumspect, affirming Australia's long-standing support for East Timor's integration into Indonesia but noting that Australia 'would like to see an early reduction in the military presence, a dramatic improvement in human rights, and a situation in which the East Timorese people manage their own internal affairs'.⁴⁷ He downplayed the prospects for rapid progress in East Timor, saying 'it is obviously a very divided place. There is no point trying to resolve the issue with a quick fix'.⁴⁸

The survey of East Timorese opinion

On his return, Downer authorised DFAT to conduct the survey of East Timorese opinion. In this, Downer was seeking 'an answer to a proposition the Indonesians couldn't answer' – whether the East Timorese would support

⁴⁵ Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, p.225. See also CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.25.

⁴⁶ John McCarthy, interview with author.

⁴⁷ Downer, Alexander, *A Long Term Commitment: Australia and East Asia*, Speech to the Indonesian Council on World Affairs and the Indonesia-Australia Business Council, 09 July 1998.

⁴⁸ Williams, Louise, 'Military Ties Help, Downer Insists', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July 1998.

Habibie's offer.⁴⁹ The survey revealed only limited enthusiasm for Habibie's plan and little support for either immediate independence or an immediate act of self-determination. However, 'almost all argued that any plan for autonomy should be put to the people for decision'.⁵⁰ The formal report noted a majority view in favour of 'a transitional autonomy arrangement, to be followed by a referendum or similar process after a specified period which varied from 3 to 20 years'.⁵¹ Significantly, the report noted that Habibie's offer of special autonomy had 'hardened' positions in East Timor, with 'some formerly moderate voices now demanding a referendum'.⁵²

Downer sent the report to Alatas in August 1998, suggesting that 'negotiation with the East Timorese provides Indonesia with the best chance it has to reach a compromise'.⁵³ Alatas viewed the report as biased – although he shared it with Habibie and other Indonesian ministers, they too 'did not give it much credence' and it was 'in effect set aside'.⁵⁴ Alatas' inaction reaffirmed to Australian officials that he was part of the problem – reluctant to negotiate directly with the East Timorese, he saw East Timor as an international diplomatic matter rather than a domestic one. Australia officials realised that in order to ameliorate the international dimensions of the East Timor Issue, 'carriage has to shift from Alatas to Habibie and TNI'.⁵⁵

Interviewed by Paul Kelly in 2006, Downer claimed that the survey had a particularly strong impact on his understanding of East Timor – "I said to my department after the survey results that 'much as you may not like this, one day that place will be independent.'" ⁵⁶ While Downer's remark remains uncorroborated, it is likely that the survey would have influenced Australian decision-makers. Given the sensitivities associated with the East Timor Issue,

⁴⁹ Alexander Downer, interview with author.

⁵⁰ Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, p.226.

⁵¹ See CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.177. Although the formal survey report has been released in this official publication, raw data concerning the consultation of East Timorese figures may become available in 2020. Though only this data will enable the survey findings to be critically assessed, they are generally corroborated by other sources – e.g. see Marker, *East Timor*, p.109.

⁵² CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.178.

⁵³ CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.180.

⁵⁴ Alatas, *The Pebble in the Shoe*, p.143.

⁵⁵ Michael Thawley, interview with author.

⁵⁶ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.486.

this survey initiated 'the first comprehensive meetings of Australian diplomats with East Timorese in 23 years'.⁵⁷ According to McCarthy, the survey 'showed we were thinking along a more progressive line...it probably laid the intellectual groundwork for the Howard Letter'.⁵⁸ Downer supported this sentiment, regarding the survey results as 'the genesis' of the letter.⁵⁹

Although the primary motivations for the DFAT survey were to ascertain the Timorese view towards Habibie's offer and encourage Indonesia to negotiate directly with the East Timorese, the opportunity for domestic political gain was also recognised. Shortly after his visit to Jakarta, Downer revealed to the Australian media that DFAT officials would be consulting directly with the East Timorese for the first time in 23 years.⁶⁰ Former officials commented that in doing so, Downer might have been seeking to differentiate his approach with that of his ALP predecessor, Gareth Evans.⁶¹

Violence in East Timor casts doubt on the Tripartite talks

In mid-July, Jamsheed Marker arrived in Jakarta with the intent of visiting Dili. However, the security situation in East Timor had worsened since Habibie's offer of special autonomy: during a visit by three European Union Ambassadors in late June, conflict between pro-independence and pro-integration groups resulted in casualties, as the Ambassadors were whisked away in a military helicopter.⁶² As observed in the DFAT survey, Habibie's offer of a special status had emboldened the East Timorese – Marker's aide reported that many East Timorese 'see in the present situation a door that has cracked ajar and needs to be pushed open for a rapid exit before it closes again'.⁶³

Probably cognisant of the international focus on Timor and the potential for violence, in late June Habibie had directed the TNI to reduce their military presence. On 28 July, with much fanfare, some TNI troops withdrew from Dili. Later, it emerged that this movement was a ruse – these troops had been

⁵⁷ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.82.

⁵⁸ John McCarthy, interview with author.

⁵⁹ Alexander Downer, interview with author.

⁶⁰ Murdoch, Lindsay, 'Australia in Secret E Timor Peace Role', *The Age*, 18 July 1998.

⁶¹ Two former Australian Government officials, interviews with the author.

⁶² Marker, *East Timor*, p.92.

⁶³ Marker, *East Timor*, p.109.

redeployed elsewhere in East Timor.⁶⁴ Another incident soon threatened to derail the Tripartite talks - in mid-November reports of a massacre in the East Timorese town of Alas emerged and in response, Portugal suspended their participation in the Tripartite process.⁶⁵

Although it was eventually established that reports of a massacre were exaggerated, developments such as Portugal's reaction probably encouraged the Australian Government's scepticism towards the Tripartite talks. Downer, in particular, was contemptuous - believing them to be 'the triumph of process over reality', he 'never thought it was important in terms of outcomes'.⁶⁶ Though the Tripartite process would eventually determine the security arrangements for the self-determination ballot, for now many believed that these talks were not yielding results. Worse still, they were drawing further international attention to East Timor: 'affecting the attitude of donors and hampering Indonesia's efforts to be accepted as an important part of the international community'.⁶⁷

Australia's strategic objectives in November 1998

From July-November 1998, Australia lobbied Indonesia to negotiate directly with the East Timorese. Australia's main effort—the survey of East Timorese opinion and its presentation to Alatas—was essentially ignored. Australian officials now viewed Alatas' determination to negotiate with the UN, as opposed to the East Timorese, as part of the problem. Thawley noted that 'Alatas simply couldn't deliver - he had no clout in the system'.⁶⁸ Insomuch as they brought further international attention on to the East Timor Issue, Alatas' diplomatic efforts were actually working against Australia's primary strategic goals - consolidation of democracy in Indonesia and the maintenance of the bilateral relationship. Rebuffed by Alatas, Australia would now turn to Habibie in pursuit of its strategic objectives concerning the East Timor Issue.

⁶⁴ See Williams, Louise, 'Downer Concerned At Timor Moves', *The Age*, 19 October 1998.

⁶⁵ Marker, *East Timor*, p.106.

⁶⁶ Alexander Downer, interview with author.

⁶⁷ Michael Thawley, interview with author. In interviews with the author, John Howard and John Moore both noted that the impact of East Timor on Indonesia's international reputation and its ability to attract international investment were significant concerns in late 1998.

⁶⁸ Michael Thawley, interview with author.

Chapter 3

The “Howard Letter” (November-December 1998)

Australia decides to change tack on East Timor

On 30 November 1998, Ashton Calvert, the Secretary of DFAT, sent Downer a note with a draft letter, from Howard to Habibie, attached. The full text of the letter and Calvert’s covering note are not publically available, but are quoted in *March of the Patriots* by Paul Kelly. Calvert described the letter as recommending to Habibie that after a lengthy period of autonomy, ‘an act of self-determination [be] held at some reasonably distant point in the future’.⁶⁹

Two days later, at a National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSCC) meeting on 01 December, the idea of a policy change on East Timor was discussed.⁷⁰ Although there are conflicting accounts of how this was presented to the NSCC, it seems likely that Downer made an oral presentation to the committee, which then agreed that Australia would change its policy on East Timor. Australia would support an act of self-determination, but one conducted after a substantial interregnum of autonomy.⁷¹ Defence officials were unaware that work was to immediately begin on the policy shift – they only learnt of the letter in late December, after it had been sent.

The letter, which was drafted by Thawley, Varghese and the Deputy Secretary of DFAT, John Dauth, emphasised that ‘Australia’s support for Indonesia’s sovereignty is unchanged’ – it explicitly noted that ‘the interests of Australia, Indonesia and East Timor are best served by East Timor remaining part of Indonesia’.⁷² It downplayed the importance of the UN-sponsored Tripartite

⁶⁹ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.487.

⁷⁰ John Howard, Alexander Downer, John Moore, Tim Fischer, interviews with author. See also Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, pp.85-86.

⁷¹ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.86. Cf. Connery, *Crisis Policymaking*, p.22. There remains significant debate about whether the NSCC agreed that there would be a policy change, or whether it went beyond this and agreed that the policy change would occur through a letter from Howard to Habibie. John Moore, in an interview with the author, explained that he expected the NSCC to discuss the matter again before any policy shift occurred. These discrepancies will likely remain unresolved until the relevant Cabinet records are released in 2029.

⁷² CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.181.

talks, noting that ‘the UN process is not producing the desired results quickly enough’ – Howard also suggested that if an agreement could be reached directly with the East Timorese, then ‘the international dimensions would take care of themselves’.⁷³ The letter concluded by suggesting that the Matignon Accords—a mechanism through which France deferred ‘a referendum on the final status of New Caledonia for many years’—might offer an example of how Indonesia could resolve the problem of East Timor’s international status.⁷⁴

Relatively few officials knew about the letter and within even this group, there were mixed feelings about what the letter should say and imply.⁷⁵ Opinion was divided as to whether there should be an explicit reference to the Matignon Accords, with some voicing concern that Habibie might take offence to the comparison. Recognising the importance of the letter and the need to anticipate Habibie’s mercurial character, Thawley asked an intelligence analyst at the Office of National Assessments to review the letter. Their task was not to offer drafting suggestions but to advise ‘how an Indonesian would read the letter’.⁷⁶ The text of the letter corroborates Thawley’s claim that it was designed ‘to make Habibie feel that the options were open – that something had to be done, but what wasn’t necessarily laid down’.⁷⁷

The intent of the letter

Four factors motivated Australia to dispatch the Howard Letter. The primary concern was to convince Habibie that despite his offer of a “special status” in June, a fresh approach was needed. Although Howard claims the ‘purpose of the letter was not to help Indonesia retain sovereignty over East Timor’, many officials had other ideas.⁷⁸ Dauth later explained that ‘a very important part of our thinking at the time that the Prime Minister dispatched his letter was that Indonesia really had only one last chance to keep East Timor as part of

⁷³ CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.181.

⁷⁴ CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.182.

⁷⁵ Michael Thawley, Peter Varghese, John Dauth, interviews with author.

⁷⁶ Michael Thawley, interview with author. See also Connery, *Crisis Policymaking*, p.21.

⁷⁷ Michael Thawley, interview with author. See also text of the Howard Letter in CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, pp.181-182.

⁷⁸ John Howard, interview with author.

Indonesia'.⁷⁹ It was hoped that Howard's suggestion—a long period of autonomy followed by an act of self-determination—would maximise the chance of Indonesia legitimising its incorporation of East Timor. Calvert believed the letter 'was designed as a warning to Indonesia and to encourage it to make a far better effort on East Timor'.⁸⁰ This was the primary thrust and main effort of the letter – Indonesia had to move quickly on Timor to prevent the issue from escalating further, possibly beyond Jakarta's control.

Clearly, these officials did not intend for the letter to prod Habibie along the path towards East Timorese independence. Varghese later commented that 'people who see the Howard Letter as a historic shift have never actually read what it says: it goes to great lengths to say to Habibie "we are not supporting independence"'.⁸¹ This view was also supported by Dauth, who noted that 'what we were advocating in the Howard Letter...was a greater measure of autonomy for East Timor, but not independence'.⁸²

Secondly, the letter reflected Australia's belief that Alatas' carriage of the East Timor Issue was aggravating the international aspects of the problem, without progressing towards a long-term, substantive result. Downer had encouraged Alatas to negotiate directly with the East Timorese to no effect and with Portugal's suspension of the Tripartite talks, Australian officials were deeply sceptical that the process could deliver results. Varghese recalled that 'our view at the time was that it was not a particularly significant process and was unlikely to result in anything that would be good for us'.⁸³ These sentiments are supported by Thawley, who said that 'the more Australia did to move these diplomatic talks along, the more irritated we were likely to make the Indonesian leadership, without making any serious progress on the issue'.⁸⁴ By elevating the matter through a letter to the President, Australian officials hoped that Habibie's

⁷⁹ Commonwealth of Australia, Official Committee Hansard, References Committee: Economic, social and political conditions in East Timor, 06 December 1999.

⁸⁰ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.487. Similar sentiments were expressed by John Moore, in an interview with the author.

⁸¹ Peter Varghese, interview with author.

⁸² John Dauth, interview with author.

⁸³ Peter Varghese, interview with author.

⁸⁴ Michael Thawley, interview with author.

involvement might reduce Alatas' role and the international profile of the East Timor Issue, while improving the prospects for a long-term solution.

Thirdly, it was also recognised that even if Habibie did not accept Howard's suggestion of a Matignon Accords-type process, any measure that reduced the international profile of the East Timor Issue would have a short-term benefit not only for Indonesia, but also for Australia and the bilateral relationship. Thawley commented that 'the letter did not lay down a specific outcome, but rather advocated a serious high-level Indonesian political process. Even if this did not produce a quick result, it would have a positive impact for Indonesia and Australia in the short-term'.⁸⁵ Varghese believed that the interregnum suggested by Howard might have had a dual benefit – it would have maximised the prospect that 'over time, the Timorese would be more comfortable with the idea of remaining part of Indonesia', but if pursued it could also have an immediate impact by 'taking the heat out of the issue'.⁸⁶ The letter advocated a patient and long-term solution, but the authors were cognisant that any Presidential effort towards this end could have a positive effect in the short-term. While this might not have conclusively addressed the matter and "lanced the boil" on the bilateral relationship, it would at least be a soothing balm that might reduce the diplomatic and political inflammation caused by the East Timor Issue.

Finally, although most of those interviewed suggested that domestic political concerns were not the primary motivation in sending the letter, it was acknowledged that this policy shift would be well received in Australia. Unusually, Calvert's submission to Downer is quoted as explicitly noting that the policy shift would align with the views of the Australian public, and Downer's near-defeat in the 1998 election may have been a motivating factor.⁸⁷ Michael Thawley observed that 'in light of the worsening situation in East Timor...the Foreign Minister would want to be active' – another senior official noted that Downer desired to 'show initiative in foreign policy'.⁸⁸ It was also possible that any international progress could mean that Australia would be 'left behind' –

⁸⁵ Michael Thawley, interview with author.

⁸⁶ Peter Varghese, interview with author.

⁸⁷ See Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, pp.486-7.

⁸⁸ Michael Thawley, interview with author and a former senior Australian Government official, interview with author.

Howard was concerned that because 'Habibie was such an unpredictable person, there was just that sense that he might just run ahead and we would just be coming along with the pack'.⁸⁹

Australia's goals in December 1998

Seen in this context, the Howard Letter encouraged Habibie to take control of the East Timor Issue from Alatas, to pursue a mechanism that maximised the chance of East Timor willingly choosing to remain part of Indonesia and to reduce the international profile of the issue through direct negotiations with the East Timorese. These measures would assist in the pursuit of Australia's strategic goals – maintaining the bilateral relationship and encouraging further progress and reform in Indonesia. Australian officials did not expect that the Howard Letter would precipitate immediate Indonesian action, but as Dauth noted there was some possibility of a substantive response – 'a lot was possible in Indonesia in those days'.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ John Howard, interview with author.

⁹⁰ John Dauth, interview with author.

Chapter 4

Habibie seizes the initiative (December 1998 – January 1999)

Habibie receives the letter

The letter was sent to McCarthy in Jakarta, with instructions that he deliver it to directly to Habibie. Reluctant to go straight to the President, McCarthy tried to deliver a copy of the letter to Alatas, who was unavailable.⁹¹ Instead, on 21 December he delivered an advance copy to Habibie's international adviser, Dewi Fortuna Anwar.⁹² This provided her with an opportunity to brief Habibie prior to his meeting with McCarthy the next day.

When McCarthy met with Habibie, he was clearly indignant at the reference to the Matignon Accords. Habibie regarded Howard's suggestion—'that Indonesia, a country that has been colonised, should use a colonial method to give an option to East Timor'—as 'insulting'.⁹³ But this was not the crux of the meeting – three issues raised by Habibie would later exert significant influences on Australia's strategic policy. Firstly, Habibie rebutted the idea that he could simply move independently on East Timor, without consulting the Indonesian Parliament. Habibie told McCarthy, 'it's not my decision – it's the MPR's'.⁹⁴ Secondly, when discussing the possibility that a UN contingent might supervise security arrangements during a period of autonomy, Habibie was unequivocal: 'I can't do that'.⁹⁵ Finally, Habibie rejected the idea that Indonesia could continue to fund East Timor for a lengthy interregnum – he had to 'decide quickly' about East Timor, because to accept Howard's suggestion would 'leave a time bomb for his

⁹¹ John McCarthy, interview with author.

⁹² CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.32.

⁹³ John McCarthy, interview with author. See also Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, p.228.

⁹⁴ John McCarthy, interview with author. See also the diplomatic cable quoted in Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.76. *Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat* (MPR – People's Consultative Assembly). The MPR is Indonesia's legislative branch, which approved the incorporation of East Timor in 1976.

⁹⁵ Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, p.229. Although Habibie later allowed a UN administrative mission in East Timor, this statement hints at the domestic constraints that would later inhibit the deployment of a pre-ballot peacekeeping force.

successor'.⁹⁶ Habibie's desire for rapid action was so great that he was prepared to simply grant the East Timorese independence – Indonesia 'would not die without East Timor'.⁹⁷ Habibie stressed that he 'took no umbrage' at Howard's approach, but rather 'welcomed it as an indication of Australia's continued interest in Indonesian issues'.⁹⁸

The letter leaks, revealing a 'historic policy shift'

Immediately before Christmas in 1998, several journalists became aware that Australia was reconsidering its policy on East Timor.⁹⁹ They sought further detail from at least two Australian officials, but were not told of the Howard Letter or the policy shift. On 11 January 1999, Downer—who was on holiday—became aware that these journalists had obtained sufficient information to write a story concerning Australia's change of policy on East Timor.¹⁰⁰ The next day *The Australian* broke the news – "Howard reverse on Timor".¹⁰¹ Given that the article was co-authored by a Jakarta-based correspondent, it seems most likely that an Indonesian source confirmed the existence and content of the Howard Letter.¹⁰²

Downer's office quickly issued a press release announcing Australia's 'historic policy shift' on East Timor. Confirming the Australian Government's desire for 'an act of self-determination at some future time, following a substantial period of autonomy', the release also reaffirmed that the Australian Government

⁹⁶ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.76.

⁹⁷ CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.32.

⁹⁸ CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.32.

⁹⁹ This account is predominantly based on interviews with two former Australian Government officials who requested anonymity. While this methodology has obvious limitations, several interviewees corroborated different aspects of the argument outlined above. For an alternate explanation, see Fernandes, 'The Road to INTERFET: Bringing the Politics Back In', p.87. Fernandes' statement that an Australian diplomat in Jakarta was instructed to leak the letter is supported by a 'confidential interview'. Fernandes' argument of a deliberate leak was not supported by any of those interviewed for this study.

¹⁰⁰ Alexander Downer, interview with author.

¹⁰¹ See Greenlees, Don and McGregor, Richard, 'Howard reverse on Timor', *The Australian*, 12 January 1999.

¹⁰² Although it is possible that the letter could have been intentionally leaked by the Australian Government—either for domestic political gain or to pressure Habibie to act on East Timor—no reliable evidence could be found to support this hypothesis. The timing of the leak—while Downer was on holidays—also casts doubt on this possibility. In an interview with the author, Downer stated that the letter was not leaked under his direction.

'continues to recognise Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor'.¹⁰³ Importantly, at a press conference that day Downer affirmed Australia's 'preference' that East Timor 'remain legally part of Indonesia' – he also cautioned against any quick movement towards a vote, as it would increase the likelihood of violence.¹⁰⁴

Ever sensitive on the issue of East Timor, Indonesian officials were particularly concerned about how the Australian Government characterised their shift. Dewi Fortuna Anwar took special note of how the Australian Government '*want it to be seen* as a major shift in Australian policy'.¹⁰⁵ One senior Australian official noted that 'the way Downer handled it annoyed the Indonesians further'.¹⁰⁶ Although there is little data concerning how the leak of the letter and its public characterisation in Australia might have influenced Habibie, *prima facie*, it seems likely that Australia's description of the 'historic policy shift' would have nurtured Habibie's instinctive reaction to move quickly on East Timor – diplomatic issues like this leak were just another reason it wasn't worth the trouble. Thus, Australia's response to the leak may have undermined its desire to avoid an 'early and final decision' on the status of East Timor.¹⁰⁷

Habibie presents Australia with a *fait accompli*

On 21 January 1999, Habibie distributed the letter to five of his Ministers, with a suggestion that if 'after 22 years, the East Timorese people cannot feel united with the Indonesian people', it would be 'reasonable and wise' for East Timor to separate from Indonesia.¹⁰⁸ Habibie's decision was approved by his Cabinet and announced on 27 January 1999. Although the format had not yet been decided, the East Timorese would have an act of self-determination.

Varghese later reflected that Habibie's decision to hold an act of self-determination so soon was 'certainly not the outcome we were looking for'.¹⁰⁹ In fact, it was the exact opposite of what the Howard Letter sought to achieve.

¹⁰³ See Downer, Alexander, *Media Release – Australian Government Historic Policy Shift on East Timor*, 12 January 1999.

¹⁰⁴ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.88.

¹⁰⁵ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.89. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁶ Former senior Australian Government official, interview with author.

¹⁰⁷ CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.182.

¹⁰⁸ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.93.

¹⁰⁹ Peter Varghese, interview with author.

Downer had earlier noted the possibility that rapid action could precipitate violence in East Timor and Habibie's determination to finalise the issue before Indonesia's Presidential elections—scheduled for October 1999—certainly increased the likelihood of conflict.¹¹⁰ Habibie's decision also refocused global attention on East Timor, ensuring that Indonesia's conduct would remain a litmus test for its standing in the international community. This too worked against Australia's strategic objective of reducing the international profile of East Timor, so that it did not damage Indonesia's reputation or interfere with its access to international financing.

Downer was 'astonished' by Habibie's announcement, but also 'very excited' – Paul Kelly recalls a private conversation in 1999 where Downer said 'I think there is now a very good chance that East Timor will be independent by the end of the year and we intend to go along with this'.¹¹¹ Varghese later noted that 'we had no option but to go along with it....we were really stuck with it!'¹¹² This point was also conceded by Downer in 2012, who agreed that although a Matignon Accords-type process would 'have been a better solution, than the one that was actually implemented', Habibie's decision essentially presented Australia with a *fait accompli*.¹¹³

Australia reorientates

Habibie's decision 'cut the Gordian knot of Indonesian East Timor policy' and Australia scrambled to find the loose ends.¹¹⁴ From this point on, Australian policy was driven largely by events in Indonesia and East Timor. A consensus view quickly developed that Australia had a significant stake in ensuring that any act of self-determination was "free and fair".¹¹⁵ Although a new objective had arisen, this was tied closely to Australia's enduring strategic concerns – the

¹¹⁰ See Williams, 'Military Ties Help, Downer Insists'.

¹¹¹ Alexander Downer, interview with author, and Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.492. Although Kelly casts this as an example of Downer's intent to achieve East Timorese independence, Downer's choice of words don't seem to convey significant enthusiasm but rather imply that Australia didn't have much of a choice in the matter.

¹¹² Peter Varghese, interview with author.

¹¹³ Alexander Downer, interview with author. In an interview with the author, John Howard also agreed that Australia little choice but to accept Habibie's decision as a *fait accompli*.

¹¹⁴ Liddle, R. William, 'Indonesia in 1999: Democracy Restored', *Asian Survey*, 40:1, 2000, p.40.

¹¹⁵ Michael Thawley, John Dauth, Peter Varghese, John Howard, Alexander Downer, interviews with author.

consolidation of democracy in Indonesia and further economic, political and civil-military reform. An act of self-determination in East Timor endangered these objectives – a flawed ballot could affect international financing and the bilateral relationship, while further bold decisions from Habibie could anger the TNI and raise the prospect of a military coup. These tensions would be persistent influences on Australia’s strategic objectives and policy throughout 1999.

Australia backing independence? Or *ex-post facto* rationalisation?

One prominent argument is that Habibie’s decision prompted Australia to work towards East Timorese independence. Paul Kelly charges that as ‘1999 advanced, Howard and Downer were sure that independence would be the outcome. By their position, they became, in effect, willing backers of an independent East Timor’.¹¹⁶ Kelly has also argued elsewhere that the ‘Howard government decided in early 1999 to work for East Timor’s independence’.¹¹⁷ Kelly intimates that Howard and Downer considered East Timorese independence as a strategic objective – he believes that their decision to directly support the self-determination ballot constituted a ‘covert East Timor independence plan’.¹¹⁸

Howard himself refutes this view, instead suggesting that he and Downer were ‘willing backers of a free and unfettered act of self-determination...I didn’t see Australia as trying to influence the outcome of the ballot’.¹¹⁹ Howard also noted that in early 1999 he was unsure as to whether the East Timorese would indeed vote for independence.¹²⁰ Kelly’s assertion also clashes with the on-the-ground reporting of John McCarthy, who until July 1999 was unsure as to the likely outcome of the ballot.¹²¹ Accordingly, the early-1999 decision to support an act of self-determination in East Timor did not automatically equate to support for independence.

¹¹⁶ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.493.

¹¹⁷ Kelly, ‘John Howard’s covert East Timor independence plan’.

¹¹⁸ See Kelly, ‘John Howard’s covert East Timor independence plan’.

¹¹⁹ John Howard, interview with author.

¹²⁰ John Howard, interview with author.

¹²¹ John McCarthy, interview with author.

Although Australia's work towards a free and fair ballot certainly assisted East Timor's subsequent vote for independence, influencing the outcome of the ballot was never a strategic objective for Australia. None of those interviewed for this study claimed that Australia was—at any point in 1998 or 1999—deliberately working to achieve East Timorese independence.¹²² Throughout the first half of 1999, Australia explicitly confirmed on many occasions that its preference was for East Timor to be incorporated into Indonesia.¹²³ Australia only adopted a 'neutral' standpoint in early August, when it was clear the pro-independence sentiment would likely prevail at the ballot box.¹²⁴

Australia's strategic objectives after Habibie's announcement

Once Habibie had made his decision in late January 1999, Australia's new strategic objective was simple – 'to see the ballot not just occur, but to see it occur credibly'.¹²⁵ Australia was determined to see this happen not due to any noble or idealistic desire to realise an independent East Timor, but because Habibie had staked his country's reputation on this ballot – Australia believed it had no choice but to help. Now playing second fiddle to Habibie, Australian policy was faced with the difficult task of managing competing objectives – achieving a free and fair ballot, managing violence in East Timor and maintaining the bilateral relationship, all while encouraging Indonesia's continued democratic development.

¹²² Many, in fact, emphatically refuted Kelly's argument.

¹²³ See, for example, Johnstone, Craig and Spencer, Stephen, 'Howard pledges police for Timor', *The Courier Mail*, 28 April 1999.

¹²⁴ See Murdoch, Lindsay, 'We're Neutral on Timor: Downer', *The Age*, 01 August 1999.

¹²⁵ John Dauth, interview with author.

Chapter 5

Dealing with the violence (February – April 1999)

Agreement on a ballot as the violence intensifies

Habibie had decided that East Timor would have an act of self-determination, but there was still considerable debate as to how this might actually occur. At the conclusion of a Tripartite meeting in early February 1999, Alatas articulated Indonesia's view that 'a referendum was not the way to proceed, because that would only reopen old wounds and re-ignite old tensions'.¹²⁶ Although alternate options were considered by Jamsheed Marker and the United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, these were discounted and on 11 March 1999 it was agreed that a direct ballot would be conducted.¹²⁷

Meanwhile, the situation in East Timor was beginning to worsen. In response to Habibie's offer of a special status in 1998, pro-integration militias had formed and in February 1999 there were reports that they were receiving arms and supplies from the TNI.¹²⁸ In late February Downer voiced his concerns to Alatas, but these were dismissed: Alatas claimed the TNI was not establishing new militia groups but arming civil defence units, which was a 'legitimate' action.¹²⁹ This demarche would establish a pattern repeated regularly throughout 1999 – Australian officials would raise their concerns about security in East Timor, only to have these rebuffed or ignored by their Indonesian counterparts. Concerned over how the violence could adversely affect the bilateral relationship and Indonesia's international standing, throughout 1999 Australian ministers—particularly Downer—would consistently downplay the connections between the militias and TNI.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Alatas, *The Pebble in the Shoe*, p.157.

¹²⁷ United Nations Press Release, SG/SM/6922, 12 March 1999.

¹²⁸ Greenlees, Don, 'E Timor – divide and conquer', *The Australian*, 06 February 1999.

¹²⁹ Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, p.232. See also Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.496.

¹³⁰ See Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.496.

Tensions in Australian policy – diplomacy or peacekeeping?

In late February, Calvert and Varghese had several meetings with the American Assistant Secretary of State, Stanley Roth, to discuss East Timor. The summary records of these meetings leaked in 1999 and are used by some to argue that Australia was determined to prevent the deployment of a peacekeeping force (PKF).¹³¹ However, comprehensive accounts reveal a more nuanced position: Calvert believed that the international community could ‘induce East Timorese and Indonesian leaders to work towards an orderly and peaceful transition and to avert the need for recourse to peacekeepers’.¹³² Varghese echoed this sentiment by noting that ‘an early offer of a peacekeeping operation [PKO] would remove any incentive for the East Timorese and Indonesians to sort out their differences’.¹³³ Although Roth maintained his personal belief that a ‘full-scale peacekeeping operation would be an unavoidable aspect of the transition’,¹³⁴ only a few weeks later he publicly supported Australia’s policy by testifying to Congress that ‘it is way premature to talk about troops in East Timor...we are pushing so aggressively to try to break this cycle of violence so that we will not have to end up with the hard choices about a PKO’.¹³⁵

Critically, Calvert and Varghese were not arguing that Australia was unwilling to contribute towards a PKF in East Timor – Calvert specifically noted that Australia would be willing to deploy peacekeepers if required, as long as they were not sent into a ‘bloodbath’.¹³⁶ Although officials understood the rationale for a pre-ballot PKF, they believed that Indonesia would simply never accept such a deployment – this sentiment was clearly conveyed in Habibie’s initial response to the Howard Letter in December 1998.¹³⁷ Although the possibility of a PKF was not precluded, it is clear that most Australian decision-makers readily

¹³¹ See Fernandes, Clinton, ‘The Road to INTERFET: Bringing the Politics Back In’, pp.88-89.

¹³² Lyons, John, ‘The Secret Timor Dossier’, *The Bulletin*, 12 October 1999.

¹³³ Lyons, ‘The Secret Timor Dossier’. Importantly, at this point the mechanism for testing East Timorese opinion had not yet been decided – this might have influenced Calvert and Varghese’s views on the prospects for violence.

¹³⁴ Lyons, ‘The Secret Timor Dossier’.

¹³⁵ Stanley Roth, in testimony to the United States of America Congress, ‘Indonesia: countdown to elections’, hearing before the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, one hundred and sixth Congress, first session, 18 March 1999, p.17.

¹³⁶ Lyons, ‘The Secret Timor Dossier’.

¹³⁷ Peter Varghese, John McCarthy, interviews with author.

accepted Habibie's position that an international presence in East Timor was unacceptable. At this point in time, Australia's strategic policy was to reduce the violence in East Timor through private representations to the Indonesian Government and the TNI.

Despite this preference to avoid an Australian Defence Force (ADF) deployment, the Department of Defence knew that if violence escalated in East Timor then a PKF might be required. Though DFAT believed that the 'very fact of raising force readiness levels' might become something of a 'self-fulfilling prophecy',¹³⁸ on 09 February 1999 the NSCC approved a Defence recommendation to bring another Australian Army Brigade to a greater state of readiness.¹³⁹ This was announced by Defence Minister John Moore on 11 March 1999 - downplaying the notion that this decision was made solely with reference to East Timor, he emphasised that Indonesia and the East Timorese retained responsibility for security and that it would be 'premature to make any decision about ADF involvement in any peacekeeping role'.¹⁴⁰ Despite Moore's public claim, one of the key reasons for this decision was the possibility that Australia might make a substantial contribution to a PKF in East Timor – Defence had explained to the NSCC that the single Brigade already at a higher level of operational readiness would be insufficient to secure East Timor.¹⁴¹ A long-term, multi-nation PKF—with Indonesian consent—would be the only realistic scenario.¹⁴²

Confusion over the Tripartite process

Against this backdrop, Defence began to plan not for a pre-ballot PKF, but rather a post-ballot PKF that would 'take responsibility for security over from TNI if East Timor opted for independence'.¹⁴³ However, there was a question as to whether the Tripartite process would make provision for a pre-ballot PKF. The UN argued for a pre-ballot PKF during a Tripartite meeting on 10-11 March, but

¹³⁸ Paul Barratt, interview with author. This view was supported by John Moore, Chris Barrie, Allan Behm and Hugh White, in interviews with the author.

¹³⁹ Connery, *Crisis Policymaking*, pp.23-24, and White, 'The Road to INTERFET', p.75.

¹⁴⁰ Commonwealth of Australia, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 11 March 1999.

¹⁴¹ Hugh White, John Moore, interviews with author. Some interviewees also noted that a single Brigade at higher readiness would not be sufficient if circumstances warranted simultaneous deployments in the South-West Pacific.

¹⁴² Paul Barratt, interview with author.

¹⁴³ White, 'The Road to INTERFET', p.76.

this suggestion was ‘indignantly rejected by Alatas, who argued forcefully that this was a matter of national honour and sovereignty’.¹⁴⁴ In late March 1999 Francsec Vendrell, Deputy Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for East Timor, visited Canberra to discuss East Timor with a variety of Departments.¹⁴⁵ In these talks, White suggested that although he wasn’t formally speaking on behalf of the Australian Government, the ADF would probably make a ‘substantial contribution’ if a pre-ballot PKF was organised by the UN.¹⁴⁶

It seems that this view was not shared by other Australian Government Departments. Varghese noted that at this time PM&C officials believed that although a PKF was desirable ‘it was unrealistic, because the Indonesians wouldn’t accept it’.¹⁴⁷ On 25 March 1999, DFAT advised Downer that it concurred with the UN’s advice, that ‘given Indonesia’s sovereignty over the province during the period of the ballot, that TNI retain responsibility for security’.¹⁴⁸ The official publication from DFAT notes that Vendrell emphasised:

There was no prospect of the Indonesian Government acquiescing to any form of non-Indonesian military or police presence to assist with ensuring security in the period leading up to the consultation. Planning for a security contingent would have to focus on the post-ballot period.¹⁴⁹

Vendrell reported back to the UN and recommended a variety of measures to reduce the likelihood of violence, but—perhaps believing it to be a lost cause—his advice stopped short of advocating a pre-ballot PKF.¹⁵⁰

Clearly, the Australian Government was not united on the prospect of a pre-ballot PKF. Downer believed that there was no prospect of Indonesia accepting a

¹⁴⁴ Marker, *East Timor*, p.139.

¹⁴⁵ Lyons, ‘The Secret Timor Dossier’, p.28 and CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, pp.72-74.

¹⁴⁶ Hugh White, interview with author. See also White, ‘The Road to INTERFET’, p.78.

¹⁴⁷ Peter Varghese, interview with author.

¹⁴⁸ Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, p.239. The source cited for this claim is a Ministerial Submission, dated 25 March 1999.

¹⁴⁹ CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.74.

¹⁵⁰ Martin, Ian, *Self-Determination in East Timor*, Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc, 2001, pp.29-33. Martin notes that Vendrell recommended the withdrawal of some TNI and the disarming of militia groups.

pre-ballot PKF, so it would be unhelpful to press the issue.¹⁵¹ Defence argued that the UN should pursue this option through the Tripartite process, while DFAT and PM&C officials accepted Indonesia's insistence that TNI provide security. The common view of the Tripartite process—scepticism bordering on disdain—may have also caused Australian officials to overlook the importance of the security arrangements that might be agreed by the UN.

Australia tries to maintain the ADF-TNI relationship

In September 1998 Australia's Chief of the Defence Force (CDF), Admiral Chris Barrie, had travelled to Jakarta to meet with General Wiranto, who was both Barrie's direct military counterpart as well as the Indonesian Defence Minister. During a meeting with Habibie and Wiranto, it was agreed that an ADF-TNI conference on civil-military relations would be held in 1999.¹⁵² From 09-11 March 1999, several senior ADF officers and Defence officials visited Jakarta to attend what was known as the "CDF-PANGAB Forum".¹⁵³ Amid discussion on the TNI's role in post-Suharto Indonesia, Barrie privately encouraged Wiranto to make sure the TNI placed significant effort into ensuring a free and fair ballot, which would hopefully result in the incorporation of East Timor.¹⁵⁴ As the decision to raise the readiness of an Australian Army brigade was to be announced on 11 March, Barrie was also tasked to explain this to Wiranto. Mindful of how Wiranto might perceive this action, Barrie 'had to try to persuade him that it had nothing to do with East Timor'.¹⁵⁵

Importantly, events such as this contributed to the perception that the ADF was capable of influencing the TNI's senior leadership – beyond supporting Indonesia's progress through the IMF and international funding efforts, Australia was also concerned with directly supporting the TNI in their effort to achieve further civil-military reform. Former Defence officials noted that at this point the TNI-ADF relationship was extremely strong, as evidenced by the conduct of the CDF-PANGAB Forum and the close cooperation on the possibility of

¹⁵¹ Alexander Downer, interview with author.

¹⁵² Allan Behm, interview with author.

¹⁵³ *Panglima Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia (PANGAB)* – Commander of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia.

¹⁵⁴ Chris Barrie, interview with author.

¹⁵⁵ Chris Barrie, interview with author.

evacuation flights for Australian citizens ahead of the Indonesian Presidential elections.¹⁵⁶

Significant violence challenges Australia's approach

During the first few months of 1999, Australia's intelligence agencies began to warn the Government that the TNI were supporting militia violence in East Timor. A Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) *Current Intelligence Brief* in early March assessed that 'further violence is certain' – while it noted that Wiranto's views on the violence were not known, DIO believed that he was 'at least turning a blind eye'.¹⁵⁷ On 06 April 1999 militia forces attacked a churchyard in Liquica, killing up to sixty civilians in what was East Timor's most violent incident since the Santa Cruz massacre in 1991.¹⁵⁸ DIO reported two days later that while the TNI's

'exact role in the incident is unclear...[TNI troops] had fired tear gas into the church and apparently did not intervene when the pro-independence activists were attacked...[TNI] is culpable whether it actively took part in the violence, or simply let it occur'.¹⁵⁹

On 17 April pro-integration militias attacked independence supporters in Dili, killing between 12 and 28.¹⁶⁰ These incidents were a significant escalation of violence and showcased the inability or unwillingness of the TNI to restrain militia activity. If allowed to continue unchecked, such incidents would endanger the ballot and significantly damage Indonesia's reputation. Ugly scenarios began to concern Australian officials: if the ballot was subverted through a campaign of militia violence, it might ensure a very close outcome – perhaps in favour of independence by only a few percentage points.¹⁶¹ Combined with possible allegations of impropriety around the conduct of the

¹⁵⁶ Allan Behm, Chris Barrie, interviews with author.

¹⁵⁷ Ball, Desmond, 'Silent witness: Australian intelligence and East Timor', *The Pacific Review*, 14:1, 2001, p.44.

¹⁵⁸ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.120. It is believed that between 150-270 died in the Santa Cruz massacre – see CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, pp.7-8.

¹⁵⁹ Ball, 'Silent Witness', p.46.

¹⁶⁰ CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.67.

¹⁶¹ Hugh White, interview with author.

vote, this could provide a basis for the Indonesian MPR to retain East Timor.¹⁶² Thus, militia violence was placing Australia's strategic objective of a free and fair ballot at serious risk.

The Bali Summit

On 19 April 1999, Howard telephoned Habibie, urging him to prevent further violence in East Timor – Howard suggested a meeting, which was arranged for 27 April in Bali.¹⁶³ Only a few days before the summit, Australian officials were informed that the Tripartite arrangements—which had been agreed, but not yet signed—had assigned responsibility for security to the TNI.¹⁶⁴ Given the violence of the preceding two weeks, Varghese noted that Australian officials were 'concerned about how all of this could spin badly out of control'.¹⁶⁵ The Australian delegation agreed that some form of increased international presence would be required in order to ensure that the ballot would be perceived as legitimate.

But Habibie had already signalled his intent to resist a PKF – in their phone conversation, he told Howard that if a PKF 'was imposed on Indonesia then it would abandon East Timor and the ballot and unilaterally withdraw'.¹⁶⁶ Downer regarded this threat as one of 'Habibie's constant secret messages to us' – avoiding this scenario, which could amount to civil war in East Timor, was an objective that had to be balanced carefully against the need for a fair ballot.¹⁶⁷

There is no question that the Australian delegation would have preferred the ballot to be supervised by a multi-nation PKF.¹⁶⁸ But many were sceptical as to whether this was possible. Varghese believed it was a 'pie in the sky' concept – there was 'no point going on and on about something which is just not going to happen'.¹⁶⁹ Dauth notes that 'it wasn't an easy period dealing with the Indonesian system...[we] made very careful judgements about every engagement

¹⁶² John McCarthy, Hugh White, interviews with author.

¹⁶³ Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p.342.

¹⁶⁴ Hugh White, interview with author.

¹⁶⁵ Peter Varghese, interview with author.

¹⁶⁶ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, pp.497-498. See also CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.80.

¹⁶⁷ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.498.

¹⁶⁸ Alexander Downer, Peter Varghese, Hugh White, John McCarthy, interviews with author.

¹⁶⁹ Peter Varghese, interview with author.

with them, and one of those judgements had to be how much we pressed him [Habibie]'.¹⁷⁰ Although Habibie had consolidated his political position since the fall of Suharto, there was concern that his policy freedom on East Timor was still constrained by the TNI. Wiranto had accepted Habibie's decision to conduct an act of self-determination, but it was felt that he would flatly refuse to accept a foreign military presence on Indonesian soil.

The Summit began with a private meeting between Howard and Habibie – in this discussion, Howard suggested that a pre-ballot PKF might assist with security in East Timor.¹⁷¹ Howard writes that this produced a 'metaphorical explosion' from Habibie, who explained that his 'position would be absolutely untenable in Jakarta if he were to agree to this' request.¹⁷² Although the point was not made explicitly it was clear that had Habibie accepted a pre-ballot PKF, this could have precipitated a civil-military showdown and posed a grave risk of a TNI coup.

Two conflicting Indonesian accounts of this meeting raise some questions about how hard Howard pushed Habibie. Dewi Fortuna Anwar believes Howard 'pressed a number of times', asking 'explicitly' if Habibie would accept a PKF, whereas Alatas believes that Howard's approach was 'not very strong...he raised it because he probably needed to raise it'.¹⁷³ Howard himself didn't think that Habibie would agree to his request, but 'thought it was worth trying...he'd already surprised me once!'¹⁷⁴ Once it had been determined that a PKF was precluded, the discussion turned to civilian police (CIVPOL) under UN authorisation – Habibie agreed to allow between 200-300 CIVPOL to supervise the ballot.¹⁷⁵

This private discussion was followed by a large plenary meeting, where Howard pushed for a large CIVPOL contingent. This suggestion visibly angered Wiranto,

¹⁷⁰ John Dauth, interview with author.

¹⁷¹ For differing accounts of this, see CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, pp.79-80, White, 'The Road to INTERFET', pp.79-80, Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, pp.343-344, and Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.498-500.

¹⁷² Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p.343.

¹⁷³ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'The Ties that Bind', Four Corners (television program), 14 February 2000.

¹⁷⁴ John Howard, interview with author.

¹⁷⁵ Greenlees and Garran, *Deliverance*, p.145.

who had an animated discussion with Habibie.¹⁷⁶ Paul Kelly's account of this meeting even has Wiranto gesturing aggressively to Habibie, indicating that any foreign presence in East Timor would be unacceptable.¹⁷⁷ Howard then pointed beyond East Timor to Indonesia itself, noting that if the ballot was anything less than free and fair then 'Indonesia's international standing would be damaged'.¹⁷⁸ Eventually, it was decided that an 'adequate' number of UN CIVPOL—between 200-300 officers, as agreed in the private Howard-Habibie meeting—would assist Indonesian police in East Timor.¹⁷⁹

It was clear that such a small force would be incapable of preventing widespread violence, but it was hoped that the increased international presence—directly assisting the integrity of the ballot—might deter violence and reduce voter intimidation. Significantly, at the conclusion of the meeting Howard noted that it was still Australia's preference to see East Timor choose incorporation with Indonesia.¹⁸⁰

Was a pre-ballot PKF ever possible?

Hugh White has since argued that in not corraling international support for a pre-ballot PKF and pushing Habibie further, Australia may have 'missed the last best chance to avoid the disasters of September'.¹⁸¹ Though White is correct in reflecting that 'there was little we could do, but we did less than we could have', it is unlikely that more strenuous efforts would have succeeded in securing a pre-ballot PKF.¹⁸² International pressure on Indonesia may have helped, but the focus of the US and European powers was on events in the Balkans – it was difficult for Australia to attract Washington DC's attention to East Timor.¹⁸³ The violence of April 1999 demonstrated that a pre-ballot PKF was desirable, but it came too late in the Tripartite process to substantively impact the negotiations. Indonesian domestic politics also placed pressure on the process – Indonesia's

¹⁷⁶ John Moore, interview with author.

¹⁷⁷ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.500

¹⁷⁸ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.500.

¹⁷⁹ For a more detailed account of these discussions, see Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, pp.500-502,

¹⁸⁰ See Johnstone and Spencer, 'Howard pledges police for Timor'.

¹⁸¹ See White, 'The Road to INTERFET', pp.78-80.

¹⁸² Hugh White, interview with author.

¹⁸³ See Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.503. Also Alexander Downer, interview with author.

next President would be elected in October 1999 and it was feared that if the ballot was delayed, then a new President might refuse to release East Timor.

An early 1999 effort to secure a pre-ballot PKF would also have entailed serious risks for Australia's primary strategic objectives. As evidenced by Habibie's frank comments to Howard in Bali—as well as Wiranto's behaviour in the plenary meeting, which Kelly characterises as Wiranto 'giving Habibie his orders even in front of the Australians'—Habibie's acceptance of a pre-ballot PKF might have precipitated a TNI coup.¹⁸⁴ From the US perspective, Stanley Roth was particularly concerned that pressure for a pre-ballot PKF might threaten the vote itself. Jamsheed Marker notes that in late April 1999 Roth:

made a forceful representation to us [the UN] about putting anything, either specific or conditional, to the Indonesians that could make President Habibie, whom Roth described as being at the end of this tether as regards East Timor, balk at the last fence.¹⁸⁵

Opinion is divided on the efficacy of Howard's meeting with Habibie. For McCarthy, an agreement for UN CIVPOL 'was presented as a victory....but really it was a loss, because we didn't get peacekeepers'.¹⁸⁶ Varghese believes Australia 'pushed as hard as we could, and what we ended up with on the police side was probably a bit more than we might have expected'.¹⁸⁷ Given Australia's relatively weak bargaining position—and Habibie's precarious situation with regards to the TNI—Howard probably achieved all he could at the Bali Summit without endangering Australia's primary strategic objectives. Given the importance Australia placed on supporting Indonesia's democratisation and maintaining the bilateral relationship, the cautious approach of Howard and Downer was likely the more prudent choice. As Thawley later reflected, it was probably an

¹⁸⁴ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.500. The possibility of a coup was also noted by several interview participants.

¹⁸⁵ Marker, *East Timor*, p.154.

¹⁸⁶ John McCarthy, interview with author.

¹⁸⁷ Peter Varghese, interview with author.

unfortunate reality that 'sometimes things have got to get bad, before they get worse, before they get better'.¹⁸⁸

Australia's strategic objectives after the Bali Summit

For the first few months of 1999, Australia played down the prospects of a pre-ballot PKF – there was little appetite to pursue a PKF that many believed Habibie would never allow. It was only when the violence of April 1999 broke out that the arguments for advocating a pre-ballot PKF became irresistible. At Bali, Howard pushed Habibie for peacekeepers to be deployed prior to the ballot, but this effort ceased when it became clear that Habibie accepting a pre-ballot PKF could precipitate a TNI coup. In pursuing the secondary objective of a UN CIVPOL force, Australia was working towards a free and fair ballot in order to support political stability in Indonesia, maintain the bilateral relationship and avoid an immediate Indonesian withdrawal from East Timor.

¹⁸⁸ Michael Thawley, interview with author.

Chapter 6

Lacking alternatives, Australia goes along for the ride (May – August 1999)

New York cautions Jakarta, as the UN puts boots on the ground

As April drew to a close, the UN was concerned that in light of the recent violence in Liquica and Dili, the security arrangements agreed in the Tripartite process were insufficient – specifically, Indonesia had resisted the inclusion of references to the disarmament and cantonment of militias.¹⁸⁹ On 30 April Kofi Annan wrote to Habibie, outlining the security arrangements he would require to approve the conduct of the ballot. Although Indonesia refused to formally accept the letter, Marker felt that at least ‘our concerns had been conveyed in unmistakable fashion, to serve as our implicit guidelines for assessing security needs’.¹⁹⁰ With the concept of a pre-ballot PKF now forfeit, several countries made similar fruitless efforts to encourage the TNI to control militia violence in East Timor.

On 05 May 1999, the Indonesian and Portuguese Foreign Ministers met in New York to sign the Tripartite agreements. The agreement on modalities stipulated that the ballot would occur on 08 August 1999 – an ambitious timeframe, agreed by the UN due to Habibie’s insistence that the East Timor Issue be resolved during his Presidency.¹⁹¹ Given the US requirement for Congress to be consulted, the United Nations Assistance Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) was not officially established until 11 June although its head, Ian Martin, arrived in Dili on 01 June.¹⁹²

Pressures on UNAMET’s timeline

On 07 June, Indonesia held elections for the People’s Representative Council. These were conducted peacefully and without military interference – a notable achievement given Indonesia’s history. Habibie’s party came second by a wide margin – Megawati Sukarnoputri’s strong polling suggested she was likely to win

¹⁸⁹ Marker, *East Timor*, p.151.

¹⁹⁰ Marker, *East Timor*, p.153.

¹⁹¹ CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.97.

¹⁹² Martin, *Self-determination in East Timor*, pp.39-40.

the Presidential election in October.¹⁹³ She had openly criticised Habibie's action on East Timor and 'considerable diplomatic effort was put into convincing Megawati that she should honour Habibie's commitments'.¹⁹⁴ Thus, the domestic political situation in Jakarta put further pressure on the timing of the ballot.

As UNAMET prepared to conduct the ballot, conditions on the ground also posed serious challenges. Martin found that while the international presence had a calming effect in Dili, by June militia violence in regional areas had caused some 40 000 East Timorese to become internally displaced.¹⁹⁵ The voter registration process, which was meant to begin on 22 June, was rescheduled to begin on 16 July.¹⁹⁶

Australia warns the TNI

After their failure to secure a pre-ballot PKF in Bali—and following repeated denials that the TNI were involved in assisting the militia—Australian decision-makers decided to try a new approach to senior TNI officers. Australian intelligence collection had revealed 'a clear picture of the TNI-militia linkages at [the] operational level' and on 18 May 1999, the Cabinet authorised an Australian mission to Jakarta. This delegation would explain Australia's knowledge of these links and warn the TNI that their covert activities would eventually become public knowledge.¹⁹⁷

On 21 June 1999, the Vice Chief of the Australian Defence Force, Air Vice Marshal Doug Riding, delivered this message to the TNI's Chief of Staff for Territorial Affairs, Lieutenant-General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Accompanying Riding were John McCarthy and a senior Defence official, Allan Behm. The Australian message was blunt and unequivocal:

¹⁹³ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.156.

¹⁹⁴ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.116. See Marker, *East Timor*, pp.170-171, for an example of such diplomatic efforts.

¹⁹⁵ Martin, *Self-determination in East Timor*, p.45. See also Samuel, Tamrat, 'East Timor: the path to self-determination' in Sriram, Chandra and Wermester, Karin (eds), *From promise to practice: strengthening UN capacities for the prevention of violent conflict*, Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003, p.217.

¹⁹⁶ See United Nations, S/1999/705, 22 June 1999.

¹⁹⁷ Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, p.241.

In our opinion the most significant threats to a genuinely free ballot come from the pro-integrationist militia groups, supported by TNI. So long as this occurs, Indonesia's claims to be supporting a fair and open process will be undermined. This is very seriously damaging the credibility of the Indonesian Government and TNI.¹⁹⁸

McCarthy remembers this encounter as having little effect on Yudhoyono, who politely deflected the accusatory statements.¹⁹⁹ According to White, though Australia 'knew quite a lot about what was happening on the ground in East Timor, we knew very little about how it was connected with Jakarta...we knew there was a connection, but we never saw what it was'.²⁰⁰

Without proof of this connection—the proverbial “smoking gun”—the visit did not result in any discernable reduction in violence. This inability or unwillingness to control the violence leaves open the possibility that senior Generals such as Wiranto and Yudhoyono had not authorised the TNI-militia links and were thus unable to order a halt to the violence.²⁰¹ At any rate, Australia's ability to affect conditions on the ground at this point was marginal – White recalls that 'we didn't have very many cards to play in this situation'.²⁰²

Preparations for a PKF

Concerned about the prospects for post-ballot violence, in May 1999 Australia began contingency planning—at the UN's request—for an evacuation of UN personnel from East Timor. This was named *Operation Spitfire*.²⁰³ After the Bali Summit, some Australian decision-makers now regarded the eventual deployment of ADF troops to East Timor as almost certain.²⁰⁴ DFAT's earlier concerns about preparations for a PKF becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy were now outweighed by the need to be ready for post-ballot violence.

¹⁹⁸ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.167.

¹⁹⁹ John McCarthy, interview with author.

²⁰⁰ Hugh White, interview with author. See also Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.166.

²⁰¹ Allan Behm, interview with author.

²⁰² Hugh White, interview with author.

²⁰³ White, "The Road to INTERFET", p.80.

²⁰⁴ John Moore, Allan Behm, interviews with author.

The ADF had begun planning for a “Phase Three” peacekeeping operation – a force to be deployed following a ballot for independence and an MPR decree releasing East Timor from Indonesia. As this would likely be a UN-led operation to be deployed once the TNI had withdrawn from East Timor, in March 1999 Australia appointed Brigadier Mike Smith as ‘Director-General East Timor’.²⁰⁵ Smith’s role was to liaise with the UN’s Department of Peacekeeping Operations in New York.²⁰⁶ By July 1999 there were firm ideas of how Australia might contribute to a post-ballot PKF and Marker was briefed on Australia’s ability to deploy two brigades under UN authority.²⁰⁷ It is important to specify that at this stage, these plans did not envisage the deployment of an Australian-led PKF immediately after the ballot. Defence had earlier advised the Government that the ‘ADF lacked the resources to stabilise East Timor once it came apart’ – planning was premised on the concept of a UN-led PKF in late 1999.²⁰⁸

In June 1999 the US Pacific Command (PACOM), based in Hawaii, requested that Australia assign liaison officers to participate in contingency planning for East Timor.²⁰⁹ PACOM’s operational plans focussed on the US military using ‘overwhelming force’ to ‘stop the killing’ that might accompany or follow the ballot.²¹⁰ Clinton Fernandes has argued that Australia’s decision not to assist this planning was part of a campaign to prevent a PKF, but his account overlooks two critical factors.²¹¹

Firstly, this was routine contingency planning conducted by PACOM – it did not illustrate US enthusiasm for a PKF. A leaked cable records the US Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific, Admiral Denis Blair, specifically noting that it ‘was unclear which way Washington would jump’ – PACOM’s work was ‘no more than prudent planning at this stage’.²¹² Australia was very well aware of the distance between

²⁰⁵ Smith, Michael and Dee, Moreen, *Peacekeeping in East Timor*, Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc, 2003, p.13.

²⁰⁶ Connery, *Crisis Policymaking*, pp.25-26.

²⁰⁷ Marker, *East Timor*, pp.178-179.

²⁰⁸ Hugh White, interview with author. This view was also supported by Allan Behm, in his interview with the author. See also Aylmer, Sean, ‘Timor: Downer says there’s no rift with US’, *The Australian Financial Review*, 02 August 1999

²⁰⁹ Daley, Paul, ‘US Marines Set For Dili’, *The Age*, 10 August 1999.

²¹⁰ Daley, Paul, ‘Downer Trips Over Secret Timor Cable’, *The Age*, 11 August 1999.

²¹¹ See Fernandes, ‘The Road to INTERFET: Bringing the Politics Back In’, pp.90-91.

²¹² Daley, ‘Downer Trips Over Secret Timor Cable’.

Hawaii and Washington DC on this issue. According to White, Australia 'knew the Pentagon wasn't going to buy this' – a claim only supported by America's reluctance to contribute ground forces in September 1999.²¹³

Secondly, PACOM's concept for a PKF in East Timor was heavily influenced by the US military's mid-1990s experience in Somalia – 'their force protection doctrine had gone right out of control...their requirements were to establish a citadel in the middle of Dili'.²¹⁴ This sentiment was supported by Moore, who was reluctant to sanction American leadership of a PKF – 'we were concerned that they would overplay their hand with Indonesia' and that this might create long-term problems for the Australia-Indonesia relationship.²¹⁵

Conflict in East Timor puts pressure on the ballot

While some observers thought the peaceful conduct of the Indonesian elections demonstrated TNI's willingness and ability to curtail violence, security incidents in East Timor cast doubt on whether the ballot should proceed.²¹⁶ Due to the attacks against UNAMET and the issue of voter intimidation, Martin recommended to New York that preparations for the ballot 'should remain suspended until the Indonesian Government had taken action resulting in a clear improvement in the security situation'.²¹⁷ McCarthy, who then believed that proceeding would pose an unacceptable risk of violence, conveyed his supporting view to Canberra.²¹⁸

These conditions posed severe challenges for UNAMET, but Marker and Annan decided that any significant delay might threaten the entire process – Annan reported to the UN Security Council that he decided to progress with voter registration 'based on positive assurances by the Indonesian authorities, on the condition that meaningful, visible improvements in the security situation will be observed in the immediate future'.²¹⁹ This course of action was strongly

²¹³ Hugh White, interview with author. This view was also supported by Alexander Downer, interview with author.

²¹⁴ Hugh White, interview with author.

²¹⁵ John Moore, interview with author.

²¹⁶ See Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.169.

²¹⁷ Martin, *Self-determination in East Timor*, pp.48-49.

²¹⁸ John McCarthy, interview with author.

²¹⁹ United Nations, S/1999/786, 14 July 1999. See also Marker, *East Timor*, p.176.

supported by Australia – Downer believed that if ‘the militias on the ground knew that violence would stop the ballot, then they would just become more and more violent’.²²⁰

The voter registration period began on 16 July 1999 – the UN Secretary General soon reported that ‘the first few days of registration have proceeded relatively peacefully, the East Timorese turning out to register in substantial numbers’.²²¹ The relatively peaceful conduct of the registration period contrasted with earlier violent incidents and raised the possibility that the ballot itself might not be accompanied by significant violence. Interviewed in 2001, McCarthy recalled that ‘things weren’t necessarily always as bad as you thought they were going to be...there was a conflicting flow of evidence as to what might happen’.²²²

Australia’s objectives – the ballot must go on

Australian officials knew that any significant postponement of the ballot would probably amount to a cancellation that would destroy Indonesia’s international standing – a dire scenario for Australia’s strategic objectives. Since April, Australia had done all it could prudently do to reduce violence in East Timor – it had cautioned TNI about support for the militia and begun preparations for a post-ballot PKF. Australian officials knew that some level of violence would accompany the ballot: closest to the action, McCarthy felt that there was ‘going to be a price paid’ for self-determination.²²³ But considered against the possibility of cancellation, achieving a relatively free and fair ballot—even one accompanied by violence—was seen as the best choice amongst a limited range of unpalatable options.

²²⁰ Alexander Downer, interview with author.

²²¹ United Nations, S/1999/803, 20 July 1999.

²²² John McCarthy, interview with Paul Edwards, Oral History Section, National Library of Australia, 25 June 2001. Copy in author’s possession.

²²³ John McCarthy, interview with Paul Edwards.

Chapter 7

The International Force for East Timor (August – September 1999)

A vote for independence and its consequences

On 30 August 1999, 98.6% of those who had registered to vote participated in the act of self-determination.²²⁴ Only a few violent incidents occurred and the day of the ballot was surprisingly calm. However, on 02 and 03 September the security situation deteriorated – militia forces began to target East Timorese working for UNAMET and foreign journalists began to evacuate.²²⁵ UNAMET decided to release the ballot results earlier than scheduled – on the morning of Saturday 04 September 1999, the results of the ballot were announced in Dili, with a simultaneous announcement in New York. 78.5% had voted in favour of independence.²²⁶

The violent response was immediate. Angered by the scale of their defeat, pro-integration militias began to attack UNAMET buildings and staff in regional areas – at Liquicia an unarmed American police officer was shot three times.²²⁷ In many cases, despite militia attempts to prevent the evacuation of East Timorese working for UNAMET, foreign staff refused to evacuate unless their East Timorese colleagues could accompany them.²²⁸ As the integrationists began to evacuate for West Timor, they looted and burnt most of Dili – a UN spokesman noted that ‘the principal weapon was gasoline’.²²⁹

Australia’s conditions for a PKF

The scale and severity of the violence shocked Australian decision-makers, particularly given the relatively peaceful conduct of the ballot itself.²³⁰ Howard and Downer called their Indonesian counterparts, insisting that the TNI needed

²²⁴ Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, p.244.

²²⁵ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.194.

²²⁶ United Nations, S/1999/944, 03 September 1999.

²²⁷ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.199.

²²⁸ Martin, *Self-determination in East Timor*, p.95

²²⁹ Traub, James, ‘Inventing East Timor’, *Foreign Affairs*, 79:4, 2000, p.78.

²³⁰ John Howard, interview with author.

to control the militias and stop the violence.²³¹ With Indonesia's consent, on 06 September the ADF began to evacuate UNAMET's non-essential staff from Dili – *Operation Spitfire* had begun.²³²

Howard spent most of Monday 06 September on the phone. Kofi Annan called and asked if Australia was willing and able to lead a multi-national PKF in East Timor. As White has noted, 'this was not a task for which Australia had specifically prepared': 'planning for this hadn't crossed our mind, because we reached the judgement that we couldn't do it'.²³³ Nevertheless, Howard affirmed to Annan that Australia was ready to lead only if Indonesia consented to the insertion of a PKF. Howard called Habibie and suggested he admit an international force to restore order in East Timor, but Habibie resisted. He told Howard that he would declare martial law, but that if this failed to stop the violence then he would invite an international PKF to restore security.²³⁴

At an NSCC meeting on 07 September 1999, it was decided that an Australian-led PKF would require:

- strong Asian participation,
- clear American support, including a security guarantee,
- Indonesian consent²³⁵, and
- a robust mandate, authorising the PKF to take "all necessary means" under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.²³⁶

Regional support

DFAT and Defence wasted no time in securing South-East Asian commitment to the operation and soon 'obtained early expressions of support...from the

²³¹ Alexander Downer, John Howard, interviews with author.

²³² CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.130.

²³³ White, 'The Road to INTERFET', p.82. The second quote is also from Hugh White, in an interview with the author. See also Australian National Audit Office, *Management of Australian Defence Force Deployments to East Timor*, Canberra ACT: Australian National Audit Office, 2002, pp.27-30.

²³⁴ John Howard, interview with author.

²³⁵ Aside from being an Australian precondition, this was also required to ensure that China did not veto a UN Security Council resolution.

²³⁶ This process is covered in White, 'The Road to INTERFET', pp.82-83 and Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, pp.505-507.

Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, New Zealand and Malaysia'.²³⁷ Given the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) norm of “non-interference”, this was an encouraging result for Australian planners.²³⁸ Although not all of these expressions of support translated into troop commitments, the willingness of Thailand to quickly commit over 1 600 troops—as well as INTERFET’s Deputy Commander—was key in ensuring the force had strong regional representation.²³⁹ Importantly, this ‘diluted the impression that it was an Australian vs Indonesian confrontation’.²⁴⁰

American support as Indonesia consents

In a discussion with US President Bill Clinton on Monday 06 September, Howard asked for an American military contribution to a PKF. Howard specifically requested ‘ground troops’, but Clinton—citing commitments in the Balkans—declined to provide this support.²⁴¹ Clinton’s inability to provide a quick contribution of ground forces shocked Howard – ‘it really brought home to me how much of a peace dividend they had taken out of the end of the Cold War’.²⁴² This had a significant impact on Howard – ‘we all felt a bit sort of alone on it...it was a surprise when he said no to boots on the ground’.²⁴³

Initially, the military decision-makers in Washington DC were determined to avoid US involvement. John Moore called the US Secretary of Defense, William Cohen, and requested only a limited commitment—‘a ship, a plane, at the very least’—to demonstrate US support. Cohen relayed the Washington DC view that the US wouldn’t be supporting INTERFET. Moore replied ‘well, so much for the ANZUS treaty’.²⁴⁴

²³⁷ CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.134.

²³⁸ See Dupont, Alan, ‘ASEAN’s Response to the East Timor Crisis’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 54:2, 2000, pp. 163-170.

²³⁹ Michael Thawley, interview with author. See also Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p.351.

²⁴⁰ Nicol, Bill, *Timor: A Nation Reborn*, Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2002, p.322.

²⁴¹ John Howard, ‘Reflections on the Australia-United States Alliance’, *Speech to the United States Study Centre*, 15 February 2011.

²⁴² John Howard, interview with author.

²⁴³ John Howard, interview with author. Downer expressed similar sentiments in an interview with the author.

²⁴⁴ John Moore, interview with author. ANZUS—a security treaty between Australia, New Zealand and the United States—is commonly regarded as the cornerstone of Australia’s defence planning arrangements.

These difficulties continued for several days: on Tuesday 07 September, Downer publicly berated the Clinton administration, commenting that 'it has been enormously difficult to get the Americans to give us any commitments on troops and logistics support...Australians would be very disappointed if the United States decided against participating'.²⁴⁵ This elicited a quick reaction from the US Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, who rang Downer to express her displeasure at his comments.²⁴⁶ Clinton's National Security Adviser, Sandy Berger, also aggravated the issue by comparing the situation in East Timor to his daughter's messy room – some perceived this as 'a very sharp reminder to Australia that when the chips are down, you cannot always automatically bank on the USA'.²⁴⁷ For these few days, at the political level, the intimacy of the Australia-US relationship was at significant risk.

Australia's leaders had hoped for a rapid commitment of American ground forces for 'the symbolism of their direct involvement',²⁴⁸ but Howard's initial request was the wrong approach given America's military commitments in the Balkans. Perhaps more significantly, it was also not what the ADF required – Australian defence officials were not concerned about a ground force contribution, but rather transport, logistical assistance, intelligence support and—most importantly—the promise of an American security guarantee. These supporting elements were agreed in a teleconference on Wednesday 08 September, enabling Clinton to ring Howard and commit to the PKF, which would be called the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET).²⁴⁹

Although Downer and Howard were dissatisfied that it took several days to reach this point, from the US perspective this was a 'highly accelerated decision-making process'.²⁵⁰ Having decided to throw their support behind Australia's efforts to secure a PKF, the US now moved to amplify the diplomatic and financial pressure on Jakarta. On Friday 10 September, as Clinton left to attend

²⁴⁵ Garran, Robert, 'US should repay loyalty', *The Australian*, 08 September 1999.

²⁴⁶ Alexander Downer, interview with author.

²⁴⁷ Tim Fischer, interview with author. For Berger's comments, see Wright, Lincoln, 'US Adviser Apologises For "stupid Metaphor"', *Canberra Times*, 20 September 1999.

²⁴⁸ Alexander Downer, interview with author.

²⁴⁹ See Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.509.

²⁵⁰ Schwartz, Eric, 'A Reminder That Friends In Deed Are Friends Indeed', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 July 2001.

an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum meeting in Auckland, he called for Indonesia to accept a PKF: 'if Indonesia does not end the violence, it must invite—*it must invite*—the international community to assist in restoring security'.²⁵¹ He also alluded to the fact that Indonesia's economic future was still dependent on IMF funding – if Indonesia refused a PKF there would be 'overwhelming public sentiment to stop the international economic cooperation'.²⁵²

By the time Clinton arrived in Auckland for APEC, he and Howard were united in their message: Indonesia must consent to an international PKF or face the economic consequences. Although the East Timor situation was not technically considered as part of the APEC agenda, an informal meeting of Foreign Ministers enabled concerned countries to voice their support for a PKF.²⁵³ This meeting 'galvanised support for intervention, and demonstrated to Indonesia the concern of its ASEAN colleagues over events in East Timor'.²⁵⁴

By this time, Australian decision-makers believed that Wiranto was likely responsible for Indonesia's continued refusal to admit a PKF: the extent of Habibie's authority—particularly his ability to control the TNI—was unclear. It was decided that Allan Behm would approach a TNI colleague and request that they pass a message to Wiranto - the UN had started to talk about possible crimes against humanity in East Timor.²⁵⁵ This message reached Wiranto as he flew out to East Timor, accompanied by an observer mission from the UN Security Council (UNSC). The UNSC report suggests that as Wiranto toured Dili his views changed, perhaps because 'he had not been prepared for the extent of the destruction'.²⁵⁶

²⁵¹ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.248. Emphasis original.

²⁵² Shenon, Philip, 'President Asserts Jakarta Must Act or Admit Troops', *The New York Times*, 10 September 1999.

²⁵³ Alexander Downer, interview with author.

²⁵⁴ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.257.

²⁵⁵ Allan Behm, interview with author. See also Daley, Paul, 'Gunning for the General', *The Bulletin*, 06 July 2004.

²⁵⁶ United Nations, S/1999/976, 14 September 1999.

As Wiranto returned to Jakarta, the 'extraordinary crescendo of diplomatic pressure' on Indonesia came to its zenith.²⁵⁷ Isolated in the international community, Indonesia faced financial Armageddon: the rupiah had slipped significantly against the US dollar and there was a very real prospect of punitive financial action.²⁵⁸ With no further room for Indonesian recalcitrance, on Sunday 12 September 1999 Habibie requested that the UN provide a PKF for East Timor.

Finalising the UN Security Council Resolution and deploying INTERFET

With Indonesia having signalled its willingness to accept a PKF, work began on the text of a UNSC resolution. Although Indonesia would have preferred a less authoritative Chapter VI mandate, the resolution passed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.²⁵⁹ The PKF was tasked to 'restore peace and security in East Timor...protect and support UNAMET...[and] facilitate humanitarian assistance': importantly, the Chapter VII resolution allowed the PKF to 'take all necessary measures to fulfil this mandate'.²⁶⁰

Australia's final deployment condition required the TNI to understand that any opposition to the deployment would attract the wrath of the US military. Although Paul Kelly claims that Cohen visited Jakarta on the 'eve of the operation' to warn that the 'deployment must not be contested', this cannot be independently corroborated.²⁶¹ On 16 September, the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff met with General Yudhoyono and emphasised the need for the 'full cooperation of the Indonesian military'.²⁶² Closer to East Timor, this message was reinforced by the presence of Admiral Blair's command ship, the *USS Blue Ridge*, which was positioned in the Pacific Ocean. It seems likely that when

²⁵⁷ Martin, Ian and Mayer-Rieckh, Alexander, 'The United Nations and East Timor: from self-determination to state-building', *International Peacekeeping*, 12:1, 2005, p.131.

²⁵⁸ See Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.260.

²⁵⁹ See Martin, *Self-determination in East Timor*, pp.113-114.

²⁶⁰ United Nations, S/RES/1264, 15 September 1999

²⁶¹ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.511. Archived records suggest that Cohen was in the US during the week immediately preceding the deployment of INTERFET – see Cohen, William, *News Advisories*, at <http://tinyurl.com/cohenarchive> [accessed 11 June 2012]. See also Cohen/Moore Joint Press Briefing, 29 September 1999, at <http://tinyurl.com/cohenmoore> [accessed 15 May 2012].

²⁶² Becker, Elizabeth, 'U.S. and Indonesian Generals Discuss Safety of Troops in Timor', *The New York Times*, 16 September 1999.

Cohen visited Jakarta in late September, he delivered the more explicit warning to the TNI leadership that INTERFET must not be contested.²⁶³

Australia's four conditions had been met; all that now remained was to deploy INTERFET to East Timor. The commander, Major-General Peter Cosgrove, flew to Dili on 19 September to discuss the entry of INTERFET with his TNI counterpart. This was a period of significant tension in the bilateral relationship – only days earlier, Indonesia had abrogated the Australia-Indonesia Agreement on Maintaining Security due to the 'attitude and actions of Australia on the questions of East Timor'.²⁶⁴ It was agreed that instead of a helicopter insertion, which might increase the risk of unintended conflict, the first Australian troops would arrive in Dili on Hercules transport aircraft.²⁶⁵ On 20 September 1999 INTERFET deployed 1 500 troops to Dili, beginning a new chapter in the history of East Timor.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ See Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p.511.

²⁶⁴ CoA, *East Timor in Transition*, p.145.

²⁶⁵ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p.274.

²⁶⁶ The operational conduct of INTERFET falls outside the scope of this study. Interested readers will find that *Deliverance* by Garran and Greenlees provides an excellent overview. For a more detailed account, see Breen, Bob, *Mission Accomplished, East Timor: Australian Defence Force participation in the International Forces East Timor (INTERFET)*, Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2000.

Conclusion

Accounts that ascribe Australia's actions during this period to a deliberate strategy—intended to either achieve or prevent East Timorese independence—are a disservice. By neglecting to examine the reactive nature of Australia's strategic policy throughout this period, these perspectives fail to acknowledge the unique pressures, constraints and challenges faced by Australian decision-makers.

Amidst notable failures, some oft-overlooked successes

Although Australia failed to achieve several of its strategic objectives—most prominently its late 1998 goal to ensure East Timor's incorporation into Indonesia and its early 1999 desire to use diplomatic means to avoid an ADF deployment—this performance must be considered against the limited strategic options available to Australia. Developments in East Timor were driven largely by Jakarta and were—to a significant degree—beyond Australia's influence.

Given that the Howard Letter unintentionally spurred Habibie along the path to independence, the limited consultation process must be seen as one of Australia's mistakes in this period. A wider, more contemplative discussion may have resulted in another option—such as an informal Ambassadorial approach, followed by a letter—being pursued. However, it is difficult to place significant blame on the authors of the Howard Letter. Habibie's January 1999 decision was bold and impetuous – it simply could not have been reasonably anticipated. Given his mid-1998 offer of a special status, it is also possible that the Howard Letter may have only accelerated Habibie's seemingly inevitable decision to allow self-determination.

While Hugh White has correctly argued that Australia could have done more to support the inclusion of a pre-ballot PKF in the Tripartite agreements, it is doubtful that this approach would have been successful. Beyond the constraints posed by the Indonesian Presidential election schedule and the international focus on the Balkans, a strenuous effort for peacekeepers would have also

entailed serious risks – it could have increased the likelihood of civil-military instability in Jakarta and endangered Australia’s primary strategic objectives.

At the Bali Summit Howard pushed Habibie for peacekeepers to supervise the ballot, but conceded when Habibie made it clear that he was unable—from a political and civil-military relations perspective—to accept a PKF. This abandoned push for a pre-ballot PKF may have helped Australia in securing the increased UN CIVPOL presence in East Timor, which substantially assisted in ensuring the integrity of the ballot. Throughout 1999, this need for a free and fair ballot was responsibly balanced against competing objectives – to prevent civil-military instability in Jakarta and to maintain the bilateral relationship. The worst-case outcome—a fraudulent or cancelled ballot, with its attendant consequences for Indonesia, Australia and East Timor—was avoided.

Australia’s pursuit of a post-ballot PKF was conducted in a measured and responsible manner. Although this was a precarious situation, with Habibie’s authority uncertain, Australia, the US and the UN carefully coerced Indonesia into inviting the UN to assemble a PKF to restore security in East Timor. Australia’s engagement with South-East Asia was energetic and impressive, dispelling doubts that the Howard Government would struggle where predecessors had excelled.

Australia eventually secured US support for INTERFET and deployed the force without incident, but this instance provides a cautionary case study of how Australian decision-makers should approach the alliance relationship. US military assistance—particularly when requested at short notice—should not be taken for granted. It must be remembered that the distance between PACOM and the Pentagon is significant, with the latter being far more connected to—and constrained by—the prevailing political sentiment in Washington DC.

Although the bilateral relationship with Indonesia was severely damaged by the East Timor Issue and remained strained for several years, it was not completely torn asunder by the deployment of INTERFET. This may seem a low benchmark, but when considered against the real possibility of inadvertent escalation and military conflict as INTERFET deployed, it is actually a significant achievement.

Although Australia may not have achieved its 1998 objective of solidifying and strengthening the bilateral relationship, given the events of 1999 the preservation of the basic relationship should be seen as a success.

On balance, a sound strategic performance

Australia's failure to achieve several strategic objectives in 1998 and 1999 was not due to recklessness, negligence or incompetence. Rather, from January 1999 onwards, Indonesia's actions often placed Australia in difficult positions, where reactions were required but strategic policy choices were limited. Critical objectives, such as Indonesia's stability and democratic progress, were threatened by events that were essentially beyond Australia's control or influence.

Any evaluation of Australia's strategic policy throughout this period must consider that from January 1999 onwards, developments were driven largely by decisions in Jakarta, not Canberra. Although Australia often found itself playing second fiddle to Habibie, strategic policy throughout this period was sound – the most important objectives were prioritised appropriately and worst-case outcomes avoided. This is the real story of the East Timor Issue. It might not have the romance of a covert plan to achieve East Timorese independence—or the Machiavellian undertones of a plot to prevent it—but this study has shown that in a series of very difficult and high-stakes situations, Australia probably achieved all it could.

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Chris Barrie	Chief of the Australian Defence Force
Allan Behm	First Assistant Secretary, International Policy Division, Department of Defence
John Dauth	Deputy Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Alexander Downer	Foreign Minister
Tim Fischer	Deputy Prime Minister
John Howard	Prime Minister
John McCarthy	Australian Ambassador to Indonesia
John Moore	Defence Minister
Michael Thawley	International Adviser to Prime Minister John Howard
Peter Varghese	First Assistant Secretary, International Division, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
Hugh White	Deputy Secretary, Strategy and Intelligence, Department of Defence
<identity withheld>	Former senior Australian Government official intimately involved in the East Timor Issue

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