Introduction

*East Timor: an Australian battleground*

In December 1975, Alarico Fernandes, a Minister in the government of the Democratic Republic of East Timor, broadcast a desperate radio message to Darwin, pleading for international assistance. He reported that

> Indonesian forces have been landed in Dili by sea… They are flying over Dili dropping out paratroopers… A lot of people have been killed indiscriminately… Women and children are going to be killed by Indonesian forces… we are going to be killed! SOS, we call for your help, this is an urgent call…¹

Fernandes’ pleas went unheeded, and perhaps 200,000 of his compatriots would die as a result of the Indonesian occupation.

Nearly a quarter of a century later, in September 1999, a distressingly familiar message was delivered by Joao Carrascalao, a representative of the East Timorese independence movement in Australia. He argued that because the East Timorese population had decisively voted for independence from Indonesia, they were now being systematically murdered and that

> the fascist Indonesian military machine and its civil government collaborators… are well on their way to their target of exterminating 344,580 East Timorese… These people will die, shot, hacked, tortured, raped and starved to death, unless the free, democratic nations of the world confront Indonesia today… please help now. If you don’t, there will be no East Timor tomorrow.²


This time though, the response from Australia was very different. By the end of September the Australian military had taken control of East Timor. They failed to prevent the deaths of around 1,500 East Timorese, the forced deportation of several hundred thousand people, and widespread physical destruction. But their presence had served as guarantee that East Timor would finally become an independent nation. It is the central concern of this thesis to explain this dramatic change in Australia’s response to East Timor’s suffering.

For decades, the half-island of East Timor has been a battleground of Australian foreign policy, both literally and figuratively. Its position in the national consciousness was secured during World War Two, when Australia launched a pre-emptive invasion of the then Portuguese controlled territory, and subsequently engaged in guerilla fighting with Japanese forces. Amidst a chaotic decolonisation process, Indonesia invaded East Timor in 1975. Australia supported the Indonesian occupation until 1999, but it was a bitterly divisive policy domestically, attracting unusually vocal and long-lasting criticism. Indeed, East Timor became emblematic of debates over whether Australian foreign policy should pursue moral goals, or whether it should be conducted according to considerations of pure realpolitik.

Australia’s 1999 military intervention provided a far more unifying and positive narrative about its foreign relations. To be sure, there have been debates about exactly why Australia intervened. There has also been no shortage of political recriminations about who might be responsible for the violence and destruction which accompanied East Timor’s independence ballot. Nonetheless, there is a near uniform consensus among commentators that the military deployment was a self-evidently positive development, which represented a fundamental break with previous Australian policy. Moreover, most existing accounts explain this change through the impact of ethical factors arising from outside the normal foreign policy making processes, although a range of differing political actors are ultimately identified as being responsible for the new policy.

This consensus makes a fresh assessment of the East Timor intervention an important task for critical scholars of Australian international relations. General popular support for the deployment stood in marked contrast to the political polarisation and

---

3 The convention of using the country’s name as representative of policy makers is adhered to throughout, except where internal divisions are being emphasised.
at times overwhelming opposition with which other aspects of the Howard government’s foreign policy was met, notably its strong support for the United States’ invasion of Iraq. If the intervention in East Timor was indeed driven by substantially different interests to Canberra’s usual international realpolitik, then it would suggest a model for the more general reform of Australian foreign policy. If, however, as this thesis argues, the intervention represented a continuation of previous Australian policy in East Timor by other means, then the Howard government engineered a remarkable political victory, pursuing its own preferred policy while drawing support from those who were more normally its critics.

**Main argument of the thesis**

Currently, there are two main explanations of why Australia intervened in East Timor. The first, mainstream explanation is that Australia was motivated by natural and obvious humanitarian concerns for the East Timorese population. A second, more Left-wing position, holds that the Howard government was forced to act against its own wishes by a mass popular campaign, which demanded intervention. In contrast, it is argued here that Canberra’s dispatching of troops to East Timor can be more satisfactorily explained as an act of Australian imperialism, designed to protect Australia’s own security interests. It ensured that East Timor’s transition to independence went as smoothly as possible from that point onwards, and that the new state was relatively stable and friendly towards Australia. As such, while at one level obviously a repudiation of past policy, Australia’s military deployment more fundamentally pursued the same objectives as its earlier support for the Indonesian occupation.

Crucial to this argument is a wider understanding of the historical development of Australia’s position within global affairs. To provide this context, this thesis employs a Marxist theory of imperialism, in which the international system is seen as being characterised by unavoidable economic and strategic competition among the major capitalist powers. As a middle ranking power, Australian policy makers are forced to accept the logic of this systematic rivalry, and take for granted that Australia may be drawn into wider conflicts between major powers in the Asia-Pacific region. Nonetheless, Australia is also an imperialist power in its own right, with its
significant economic and military power providing a substantial capacity to defend its interests in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific.

Most importantly, Australia has sought to ensure the existence of friendly and stable regimes in the Indonesian archipelago. Successive Australian governments have been driven by a fear that if a major power such as Japan or China gained a foothold in this region, it could then threaten Australia’s territory, or sever vital trade and communications routes. Australia’s relations with Indonesia since World War Two have been dominated by this concern, leading to policies as diverse as qualified support for Indonesian independence and strong backing for the Suharto dictatorship. The question of East Timor was subsumed within these wider security interests. Australia supported Indonesia’s invasion of the territory in 1975 not only to further the relationship with Jakarta, but also due to Australia’s own aversion to the creation of a small, strategically vulnerable neighbour.

This strategy was reasonably successful as long as the Suharto dictatorship remained intact. By September 1999, however, Indonesian authoritarianism could no longer be relied upon to protect Australia’s strategic interests. Indonesia’s economy was decimated by the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998, leading to a mass popular movement which forced Suharto to resign in May 1998. At the same time, a new wave of resistance within East Timor itself challenged Jakarta’s control of the territory. Faced with increasing political and financial pressures to resolve the East Timor question, Suharto’s successor BJ Habibie granted an independence referendum. The Indonesian military responded to their defeat in this ballot with a wave of mass killings, physical destruction and forced deportations. Their purpose, however, was not to retain the territory, but to punish the East Timorese population and warn other Indonesian provinces not to challenge Jakarta’s centralised rule.

As the ballot approached, Australia was forced to confront the unwelcome reality that East Timor would soon become an independent nation. This was particularly troubling given the uncertain regional situation at the time, which came to be known as the ‘arc of instability’ across Australia’s northern approaches. The possibility that East Timor might become a weak or failed state, vulnerable to great power manipulation or causing further regional unrest, was no more attractive in 1999 than in 1975.
From early 1999, the Howard government therefore sought to reconcile two sometimes contradictory interests. On the one hand, Australia wanted the transition to independence to proceed as smoothly as possible, and to ensure that its own interests would be protected by the new state. At the same time, however, Australia’s longstanding interest in friendly relations with Indonesia was undiminished. As a result, Canberra continued to recognise Indonesia’s sovereignty in East Timor and its responsibility for maintaining security before the ballot, despite knowing from an early stage that the Indonesian military was itself responsible for violence in the territory.

Until the independence ballot was held on August 30th, Australia’s policy was essentially reactive, responding to political upheavals in Indonesia and East Timor about which it could do little. But as soon as the vote favouring independence was announced, Australia swiftly moved to impose itself in the process of determining East Timor’s future. By September 7th it had launched a major military operation which would establish it as the de facto governing power in East Timor. These efforts were precipitated by earlier preparations undertaken by the Australian military, and by diplomatic assistance from the United States. As far as possible, however, Australia avoided conflict with Indonesian military forces, which were allowed to complete their departure from East Timor as their Australian counterparts arrived. This prevented further damage to Australia-Indonesia relations, but limited the humanitarian benefits of the intervention.

Nonetheless, the insertion of Australian forces brought to an end the power vacuum in East Timor, laying the basis for what was from that point on a relatively ordered transition to independence. The potential for ongoing conflict between Indonesian and East Timorese forces, or the creation of a weak state with limited authority over its own territory, was foreclosed. This addressed Canberra’s concerns that East Timor’s exit from Indonesia could trigger wider regional instability. The intervention was also a guarantee that the new state would have a friendly orientation towards Australia and its allies, and that Australia’s economic and strategic interests in East Timor could not be ignored during the transitional process.

Overall, the intervention in East Timor was a success, placing Australia’s specific strategic interests there on a new, sustainable footing. At the same time, relations with Indonesia did not suffer as much damage as might have been expected.
Moreover, Australia’s standing as a regional power was enhanced. Domestically, widespread support for its actions in East Timor allowed the Howard government to build a consensus in favour of further foreign interventions, as well as for a substantial increase in military spending. This made possible the emergence of a new policy of Australian intervention in the domestic affairs of Southwest Pacific nations, in which the East Timor deployment served as an important precedent.

**Scope and method of the thesis**

At its core, this thesis is a study of Australian foreign policy making. It seeks to explain why the Howard government chose to intervene militarily in East Timor in September 1999, apparently breaking with an entrenched orthodoxy in Australian international affairs. Such a task, however, presents a range of difficulties for critical international relations scholarship. No ‘smoking gun’ documentary evidence is likely to exist for the sort of argument being presented, or if it does, it is unlikely ever to see the light of day. It is difficult to know what weight to give any individual public statement made by policy makers, involving as they do both genuine expressions of their thinking on a particular issue, but also layers of political and diplomatic rhetoric. This problem has been compounded by the politically and emotionally charged nature of the events of 1999, as well as ongoing controversies within Australia-East Timor relations. Moreover, many commentators have themselves been practically involved in one way or another with the issue, or have been closely associated with the ensuing political debates.

A further difficulty is presented by the interpretive framework employed in this thesis, that is, a Marxist analysis of imperialism. According to this framework, imperialism is not an objective thing, but rather an example of what Ollman describes as an ‘internal relation’, which exists only as a cluster of interrelated economic, social and political relationships. As such, an analysis of Australia’s foreign policy, or of any episode within it, cannot be built up from discreet building blocks of self-evident facts, some of which have an ontological priority and provide a necessary and sufficient foundation for more complicated propositions that follow. Rather, the theoretical framework informs the interpretation of each piece of

---

evidence; conversely whether this interpretation seems justified in any given instance will depend on the coherence of the whole argument.

In line with this approach to studying social relations, the thesis draws on a wide range of empirical material, including policy documents, public statements of politicians, media accounts, economic data, opinion polling and cultural events. In addition, the work of foreign policy intellectuals, both in academia and more public positions such as the media, is frequently treated as evidence of the wider policy making process, rather than as disinterested commentary. Drawing together broad patterns of evidence, and keeping in mind the dictum that actions speak louder than words, goes some way towards penetrating the rhetoric of politicians.

In dealing with these sources, each chapter moves back and forth between a narrative of events, an evaluation of existing commentary on those events, and the thesis’ own argument. This necessarily involves some repetition, but has the advantage of fully drawing out the interrelation between real world events and the political debates surrounding them. A further result of this approach is that the thesis contains no overall literature review, but rather each chapter discusses the literature relevant to its subject matter.

The scope of the thesis is also somewhat greater than might be expected given the central question of explaining Australia’s foreign policy making in 1999. The argument both extends backwards in time to explore the long term historical context of Australia’s relations with Indonesia and East Timor, and extends forwards to trace the development of policies which began in 1999 but the full significance of which was not always obvious at the time. The thesis also deals with a far broader range of political developments than ‘international relations’ narrowly conceived. Foreign policy making is regarded as inextricably linked to a nation’s underlying social and economic structures. Moreover, domestic political developments are regarded as at times introducing unforeseen change into seemingly stable arrangements of international affairs. In particular, this thesis argues that domestic political upheavals in Indonesia and East Timor are of vital importance in understanding Australia’s policy making in 1999. Accordingly, a whole chapter of the thesis is devoted to this issue. This discussion was informed by fieldwork interviews with Indonesian and East Timorese civil society actors. Such perspectives have received relatively little attention in the existing literature.
Structure of the thesis

Chapter One situates the thesis within existing debates regarding Australian foreign policy. It argues that Australia should be seen as an imperialist power in its own right, according to a Marxist understanding of imperialism. This framework is then employed to outline the history of Australia’s foreign relations from World War Two, finishing with an evaluation of the Howard government’s foreign policy up to 1997.

Chapter Two explores in greater detail how Australia’s strategic concerns have historically impacted on relations with Indonesia, particularly in regards to Australian support for the Suharto dictatorship and its occupation of East Timor. It is argued that these policies were not the result of Australian weakness or ‘appeasement’ of Indonesia, but rather because Suharto’s actions served Australia’s own interests in regional stability.

Chapter Three examines how the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998 led to the downfall of Suharto and the granting of an independence ballot in East Timor. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the Indonesian military’s motivations for the policy of post-ballot violence and destruction in East Timor.

Discussion of Australia’s response to the East Timorese independence process begins in Chapter Four. The chapter charts the development of Australia’s policy from 1997 until September 1999, and argues that over this period the Howard government was forced by events outside of its control to continually adjust its policy, in an attempt to accommodate competing objectives in East Timor and Indonesia. This chapter also outlines existing academic accounts of the intervention policy. It argues against those accounts which stress the role of Australian domestic opinion in forcing the government to act as it did, and raises some prima facie objections to the idea that the government acted because of inherent humanitarian considerations.

This last argument is pursued more fully in Chapter Five, which explores Australia’s actions in East Timor from September 1999 onwards. It is argued that initial military operations were primarily designed to defend Australia’s security interests and maintain relations with Indonesia, rather than having humanitarian concerns as their highest priority. This pattern continued as East Timor progressed towards independence, with Australia using the influence it had gained through the
intervention in pursuit of its own national interests, including during negotiations over oil and gas deposits in the Timor Sea.

Chapter Six brings together the various strands of argument developed throughout the thesis to that point. It makes the case that Australia’s 1999 intervention in East Timor should be understood as a successful act of imperialism, and draws out continuities with previous policies. This chapter also examines the impact of the intervention on Australia’s foreign relations and domestic politics, and argues that Australia’s standing as a regional power was greatly enhanced.

Finally, Chapter Seven discusses the role of the successful East Timor deployment in encouraging and facilitating a new Australian policy of intervention in the domestic affairs of Southwest Pacific nations. Once again, the underlying motivation for this policy is seen as being to secure Australia’s own strategic interests.
Chapter One

Australia’s international relations,
1945-1997

The 1999 military intervention in East Timor reignited longstanding debates over Australia’s position in the world order, most notably its relations with Asia and its ability to act as a regional power. This chapter uses a Marxist framework to situate Australia as a middle ranking power within a global system of imperialism. It argues that Australia has substantial capacity to defend its own interests in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and has entered into alliances with great powers not out of subordination, but rather to further enhance its freedom of action. The chapter first outlines the thesis’ theoretical framework, before briefly examining the history of Australia’s foreign relations from World War Two. Finally, the historical context of the Howard government’s foreign policy leading up to the East Timor intervention is assessed. Only passing reference, however, is made here to Australian relations with Indonesia and East Timor itself, which are addressed in full in Chapter Two.

1. Australia and the world imperialist system

The liberal-realist debate

Before outlining the thesis’ own theoretical perspective, this section offers an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of mainstream academic accounts of Australia’s international relations, as viewed through the prism of arguments between realists and liberals. Such a framework no doubt greatly simplifies the range of academic debate on Australian foreign policy.¹ Nonetheless, the liberal-realist axis provides a fair guide to the political controversies surrounding the actions of the Australian state in the international sphere, with realists for the most part loosely aligned with orthodox foreign policy, and liberals generally adopting a more critical

¹ For example, the differences and interactions between realism, neo-realism, liberalism and neo-liberalism cannot be entered into here.
stance. This dichotomy becomes particularly evident in the history of Australian-
Indonesian relations. It is also important for examining the broad intellectual support
generated by the Howard government for its eventual intervention in East Timor, as
discussed in Chapter Six.

In Australia, as in other advanced Western nations, the realist school of international
relations has enjoyed a symbiotic relation with government. Realist ideas have
provided the chief ideological framework and justification for Australia’s foreign
policy, while there has been an interchange between academic and diplomatic
positions for leading realist thinkers.2 Realism can play this role because, as Cox
argues, it is a ‘problem solving theory’ which ‘takes the world as it finds it, with the
prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are
organised, as the given framework for action.’3 Inherently conservative in bias,4
realism assumes the permanence of the modern international system, in which actual
or potential conflict between nation states is an unavoidable fact of life.

Because of their stress on the instability of the international order, the inherent
insecurity of Australia’s position in the world comes to the fore in much realist
writing.5 A relatively minor power, Australia is seen as susceptible to attack or

---

2 Particularly scholars based in the Research Schools at the Australian National University. See D.
Sullivan, ‘Professionalism and Australia’s security intellectuals: Knowledge, power, responsibility,’
3 Robert Cox, ‘Social forces, states and world order: Beyond international relations theory,’
Millennium: Journal of International Studies 10, no. 2 (1981), p. 128. See also Justin Rosenberg,
The empire of civil society: A critique of the realist theory of international relations, London, Verso, 1994,
pp. 29-34.
4 Cox, ‘Social forces, states and world order,’ pp. 129-130.
5 Recent works on Australian foreign policy using a realist framework include Henry Albinski,
‘Australia and the United States,’ in Australian foreign policy: Into the new millennium, ed. F.A.
Mediansky, South Melbourne, Macmillan Education Australia, 1997; Desmond Ball, ‘The strategic
essence,’ Australian Journal Of International Affairs 55, no. 2 (2001); Coral Bell, ‘Political
objectives,’ in Australian foreign policy: Into the new millennium, ed. F.A. Mediansky, South
Melbourne, Macmillan Education Australia, 1997; Gary Brown, Australia’s security: issues for the
new century, Canberra, Australian Defence Studies Centre, 1994; Andrew Cooper, Kim Richard
Nossal, and Richard Higgot, Relocating middle powers: Australia and Canada in a changing world
order, Vancouver, UBC Press, 1993; Rawdon Dalrymple, Continental drift: Australia’s search for a
regional identity, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003; Alan Dupont, Australia’s security interests in Northeast
Asia, Canberra, Strategic and Defense Studies Centre, 1991; David Goldsworthy, ‘Regional relations,’
Edwards and David Goldsworthy, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 2003; Richard Leaver,
‘Patterns of dependence in post-war Australian foreign policy,’ in Middling, meddling, muddling:
Issues in Australian foreign policy, ed. Richard Leaver and Dave Cox, St Leonards, Allen & Unwin,
1997; Mohan Malik, ‘Securing Australia: From alliances to agreements,’ in Australia’s security in the
Southeast Asia,’ in In pursuit of national interests: Australian foreign policy in the 1990s, ed. F.A.
Mediansky and A.C. Palfreeman, Sydney, Pergamon Press, 1988; John Ravenhill, ‘Cycles of middle
power activism: Constraint and choice in Australian and Canadian foreign policies,’ Australian
dominance by its Asian neighbours, particularly China and Japan. This sense of vulnerability has been heightened by the geographical distance of Australia from its traditional security and economic partners. As discussed below, the increasing economic importance of Asia to Australia has not removed these strategic concerns. Ongoing fears about Australia’s security are therefore not paranoid or illogical from a realist stance; they accord with the logic of regional and global interstate competition. This places a major limitation on Australia’s freedom of action within the international arena, sometimes forcing it into morally unpalatable policies.

In this context, the chief ‘problem solving’ tactic of Australian realism has been strong support for the alliance with the United States, under the ANZUS (Australia New Zealand United States) Treaty. Traditionally, the alliance was seen as a guarantee of Australia’s security, although this was never assumed to be complete.6 This argument was replaced during the 1980s by a focus on specific practical benefits of the alliance, revolving around seemingly uncontroversial technical considerations.7 Thus for Albinski in 1997, ‘The alliance is utilitarian; it is neither mystical nor someone’s sheet anchor of security.’8 A key work in this turn was Ball’s 1980 analysis, which stressed that the foundation stone of the alliance was Australia’s ‘suitable real estate’ for communications and spy bases, rather than the more glamorous image of diggers and marines slugging it out shoulder to shoulder in East Asian battlefields.9 In return, Australia is said to gain a long list of military and strategic benefits from the alliance, including access to intelligence, preferential treatment when sourcing military technology and materiel, and the benefit of joint training with the world’s pre-eminent military power.10

---

7 As discussed below, this was a somewhat belated response to United States’ defeat in Vietnam, and the ‘Guam doctrine’.
9 Desmond Ball, A suitable piece of real estate: American installations in Australia, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1980. For a recent restatement, see Ball, ‘The strategic essence.’
10 As well as Ball, for arguments along this line, see John Baker and Douglas Paal, ‘The U.S.-Australia alliance,’ in America’s Asia alliances, ed. Robert Blackwill and Paul Dibb, Cambridge,
Realist scholars have generally been more positive about the historical achievements of Australian foreign policy than the liberal school, as discussed below. This has not, however, precluded realist critiques of specific policies, as mistakes can and have been made through miscalculation, arising from the difficulties inherent in charting the course of a small, vulnerable nation. For example, there have also been some realist critiques of the alliance with the United States as providing a false sense of security.11 Leading realist scholar Coral Bell argues that ‘strategic dependency’ led to a greater Australian commitment in Indochina than was ‘morally or intellectually justifiable’.12 Without such constructive criticism, realist thought would be of far less value to the state in periodically adjusting its policy stance.

Australian foreign policy has come under far more sustained criticism from writers working within liberal and postmodern frameworks. These accounts resonate with older, Left-nationalist critiques, which blamed Australian ‘subordination’ to Britain or the United States on their economic domination.13 More recently though, academic criticism has shifted away from a radical economic critique towards a more classically liberal approach, focusing on the ethical repugnance of many of Australia’s foreign policies, and stressing the benefits of international cooperation,
interdependence and rule of law. Such benefits are seen as being downplayed or ignored by Australian realism, whose focus on security concerns has created a senseless barrier to a reformed Australian foreign policy, most notably by preventing more constructive relations with Asia.

In particular, liberals have tended to argue that dependence on the US has been unnecessary, from which has followed, in Cheeseman’s words ‘the subordination of Australia’s defence and security interests to those of our imperial benefactors.’ This subservience is generally blamed on an overly defensive attitude towards Asia, which has prompted Australia to look for protection from a powerful ally. Critics of the alliance can point to a string of military engagements which Australia entered for the purpose of alliance politics, and argue that none served the national interest beyond the rationale of the alliance itself. This view is summarised by Beeson;

For a country with no obvious enemies, the main threats to Australian security since World War II have, paradoxically enough, actually resulted from its U.S. alliance.

Within this general framework, however, there has been substantial variation in the precise analysis of the Australia-United States relationship. For example in 1990 Bolt went so far as to characterise Australia as a ‘loyal cog in the United States’ military machine’, while Burchill takes a more nuanced approach, arguing that although

---


Australian policy is not simply dictated by the US, the sense of strategic dependence has sometimes resulted in Australia being content with a ‘client status’.19

Leaver argues that Whitlam’s failure to significantly change the relationship with the United States led to a ‘toughening’ of the dependence thesis among Leftwing commentators, with structural critiques replacing more ‘voluntarist’ approaches.20 However, liberal critiques continue to stress the lack of political will to reform Australian foreign policy, following from the underlying idea that the realist policy is at its core irrational, based on faulty reasoning and misguided assessments of Australia’s situation, which border on willful ignorance or paranoia.

For example, according to Smith, Cox and Burchill, Australia’s security fears are unfounded, because no country could invade Australia. The reliance on the US alliance therefore stems from domestic fears about Asia which approach paranoia, as well as cultural affinities with the Anglo-American world.21 For Cheeseman, Australia’s focus on a non-existent Asian threat meshes with the ‘purely realist terms’ of policy makers and, combined with a failure to consider the complexities of the post-Cold War world, leads to an overly aggressive defense policy.22 This is not to argue that liberals never consider the question of Australia’s relation to wider power dynamics in the region. For example, Camilleri argues of the US alliance that ‘Australia’s little stick is reinforced and legitimised by America’s big stick.’23 Ultimately though, he falls back on psychological explanations:

The reassurance [of the US alliance]… is not purely or even primarily economic and political. It is fundamentally psychological, for it provides Australians a way out of the dilemma which they would otherwise need to confront, namely, the unresolved tension between history and geography.24

---

20 Leaver, ‘Patterns of dependence in post-war Australian foreign policy,’ p. 73.
21 Smith, Cox, and Burchill, Australia in the world: An introduction to Australian foreign policy, pp. 22-26.
An additional major theoretical perspective in the critique of Australian international relations has been provided in recent years by scholars influenced by post-modern and post-structuralist ideas. Here, a misguided epistemology is seen as the cause of Australia’s overly defensive foreign policy. For example, according to George, realist theory is based on an outdated ‘empiricist metaphysics’, which is part of ‘a discursive strategy employed by conservatives seeking to give analytical legitimacy to status quo politics.’ As a result, Australia has historically been reduced to ‘an intellectual and political lackey of Western power interests in the Asia-Pacific region.’ Sullivan identifies a ‘constant paranoia’ in Australian foreign policy, which manifests itself despite ‘challenges to [the policy orthodoxy’s] claim to reflect the real and produce rational policy outcomes.’ For Burke, there is a ‘murderous fantasy of identity’ at the heart of Australia’s security discourse. To change this, ‘the fundamental task is to problematise the unity of nation and self’ and institute ‘a permanent critique of totalities and universals’ with their metaphysical roots and ‘egoistic drive to sameness’.

Their post-modern theoretical roots notwithstanding, these perspectives share with liberal accounts a fundamentally idealist critique, focusing on the psychological and intellectual failings of policy makers. As a result, they ultimately recommend practical changes in policy similar to more traditional liberal approaches.

While liberal and post-modern approaches have revealed negative features of a foreign policy based on a militaristic response to racialised fears, they fail to adequately account for this policy. When policies such as the ANZUS alliance have been pursued for so long (and at times at great cost) they cannot be considered as simply the result of mistaken perceptions of the world or personal failings of political

---

26 Ibid., p. 15.
29 For example, see Ibid., pp. 315-321; George, ‘Quo vadis Australia? Framing the defence and security debate beyond the Cold War,’ pp. 47-48; Michael McKinley, ‘The bitterness of being right’: Reflection on alliance orthodoxy, the Gulf War, and the New World Order,’ in The Gulf War: Critical perspectives, ed. Michael McKinley, St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 1994, pp. 172-173, 199-201.
will. They point to structural determinants of policy not enunciated in liberal or post-modern approaches. Moreover, as discussed below, liberal approaches inadequately account for Australian policies in the Pacific and Southeast Asia which are only tangentially related to the US alliance.

A Marxist theory of imperialism

To address these shortcomings, this thesis approaches Australian foreign policy using the Marxist concept of imperialism. This approach retains the critical insights provided by liberalism, but grounds them more securely in an understanding of international and domestic political, economic and social structures. Most importantly, foreign policy is not seen as simply the domain of autonomous politicians or bureaucrats, nor can it ever be the expression of a unifying ‘national interest’. Rather, a nation’s foreign policy is ultimately an expression of the interests of its ruling class. These interests are mediated through the actions of the state, as well as through the work of intellectuals who see their role as advancing ‘their’ nation’s interests.

The classic Marxist theory of imperialism was developed by Hilferding, Luxemburg, Bukharin and Lenin before and during the First World War. These writers agreed that inherent tendencies towards crisis within the capitalist economic system resulted in a drive towards economic and military expansion on the part of the major capitalist states, although they differed over the causes of these economic problems. The outcome was the grab for colonial possessions by the European powers in the

---

30 Or to put it another way the ‘national interest’ always represents this underlying class interest. For the author’s own conception of the ruling class in the Australian context, see Sam Pietsch, ‘To have and to hold on to: Wealth, power and the capitalist class,’ in *Class and struggle in Australia*, ed. Rick Kuhn, Sydney, Pearson Educational Australia, 2005. This analysis draws heavily on the work of Connell and Irving, especially R.W. Connell and T.H. Irving, *Class structure in Australian history: Documents, narrative and argument*, Melbourne, Longman Chesire, 1980.


1870s and 1880s, and increasing international tension which ultimately led to World War One. Such intense competition, as well as the total incorporation of national resources into the ‘war economy’, constituted qualitatively new developments in international relations. ‘Imperialism’ should therefore be seen as a specific phase of history associated with mature capitalism, although there can be no absolute distinction drawn between imperialism and earlier phases of international competition, in particular the earlier mercantile and colonial rivalries of states such as England, Holland, Spain and France.33

Some specific features of these theories have not stood the test of time. Luxemburg’s under-consumptionist theory of capitalist crisis is incorrect, while the role of the tendency towards monopoly in advanced capitalist economies was overstated by Hilferding and Bukharin, and even more so by Lenin.34 Nonetheless, the general picture of imperialism as a system of international competition remains valid.35 As capital accumulates within a national economy, there is a tendency for the economy as a whole to experience a falling rate of profit, resulting in recurring economic crises. In an attempt to boost profit rates, capitalist firms pursue international strategies on an ever more intensive and extensive basis. This can take the form of exports to new markets, the quest for cheaper raw materials, efforts to monopolise specific markets or sources of raw materials, or the export of capital to more profitable locations around the globe.

However, capitalism obviously developed in the context of earlier forms of interstate competition, leaving an historical legacy of territorial division and state power.36 Moreover, as the same tendency towards over-accumulation is at work within each major capitalist country, the interests of national blocs of capital come into conflict. Increasingly, the capitalist class in each nation looks to its ‘own’ nation state to

34 For the limitations and advantages of the various writers, see Brewer, *Marxist theories of imperialism*, pp. 61-127.
35 A recent restatement of the general Marxist theory of imperialism as driven by a crisis of over-accumulation, has been provided David Harvey, *The new imperialism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, especially chapters 3 and 4. For criticism of Harvey’s work from within a Marxist framework, see the symposium in *Historical Materialism* 14, no. 4 (2006).
36 For an exploration of how this fact has impacted on international relations under capitalism, see Justin Rosenberg, ‘Why is there no international historical sociology?’ *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006).
protect its interests abroad. There is also a tendency for capital to become concentrated within national economies, and for increased involvement of the state in managing the national economy and providing support for major capitalist firms. The ‘national interest’ in economic, military and diplomatic affairs therefore becomes indistinguishable.

Capitalist imperialism is the result of these intertwined economic and political processes. It is, as Harvey puts it,

>a contradictory fusion of the ‘the politics of state and empire’ (imperialism as a distinctively political project on the part of actors whose power is based in command of a territory and a capacity to mobilize its human and natural resources towards political, economic, and military ends) and ‘the molecular processes of capital accumulation in space and time’ (imperialism as a diffuse political-economic process in space and time in which command over and use of capital takes primacy). 37

Thus, while ultimately linked to economic processes, imperialism is a generalised system of international competition in which the state assumes a high degree of political autonomy. Military and diplomatic power become, if not entirely ends in themselves, then certainly detached from any specific economic goals. Global competition is seen by each nation state as a zero sum game, in which any gain by a competitor, actual or potential, is seen as a loss to the home nation. Hence a major power like the US can at times place great importance on establishing or preserving its dominance in countries such as Vietnam or Afghanistan, whose direct economic importance is marginal at best, and certainly not worth the financial cost of extended military campaigns. If control of such places were simply ceded to rival powers, this would undermine the position of the first power both strategically and in terms of prestige and influence, ultimately reducing its ability to dominate countries which are of intrinsic economic importance.

Paralleling the anarchic nature of capitalist economic competition, the system of imperialism as competition between major powers appears to each of its participants as uncontrollable and unavoidable. The best that can be hoped for is the relative dominance of one’s home nation over its rivals. Outcomes which are irrational from

---

the point of view of humanity as a whole, such as the World Wars, are arrived at through decisions which are rational or even ‘inevitable’ from the point of view of the individual states involved. It should be emphasised, then, that imperialism is not a question of one or more states following a deplorable but contingent policy. It is the inescapable logic of international relations under developed capitalism.38

This analysis has an obvious parallel in realism’s insistence on structural competition between nation states as the foundation of international relations, particularly in its neo-realist variant.39 It is precisely this which allows realism to aid the ‘problem solving’ of professional diplomats, within certain bounds. Callinicos has gone so far as to describe the Marxist theory of international relations as having a ‘realist moment’.40 However, realism’s abstraction of the international state system from the specific social and economic bases of those states means that it obscures the ultimate determinants of foreign policy. It is therefore incapable of exploring the domestic dynamics of foreign policy making, or of explaining dramatic changes in international affairs.41 The task for a critical analysis is to successfully chart the dialectics of territorial and economic power, and of change and stability, at work in the international system. Such an analysis can only proceed concretely in a given instance, which is what this thesis attempts regarding Australia’s intervention in East Timor.

Australia’s place in the global system

Australia is a middle ranking power within the context of world imperialism. It is certainly not amongst the great imperialist powers, which hope to dominate on a global scale. Contrary to the views of Left-nationalists, however, Australia is in no

38 Although imperialism is in turn also predicated on more fundamental connections between the interstate system and capitalist economic relations. For examples of theorising about these processes, see Callinicos, ‘Does capitalism need the state system?’ especially pp. 543-547; Alex Callinicos, ‘Marxism and the international,’ British Journal of Politics and International Relations 6, no. 3 (2004); Rosenberg, Empire of civil society, pp. 123-173; Rosenberg, ‘Why is there no international historical sociology?’

39 Cox provides a useful discussion of the similarities, but also major differences, between neo-realism and Marxism in this regard. Cox, ‘Social forces, states and world order,’ pp. 134-135.


41 For a trenchant critique from a Marxist perspective, see Rosenberg, Empire of civil society, pp. 9-37. Realism’s inability to cope with changes in the system is highlighted by Cox, ‘Social forces, states and world order,’ pp. 129-130.
way oppressed by the international system. Despite its colonial origins and the ongoing importance of foreign investment, Australian capitalism has matured into a modern economy which cannot be considered subordinate to its overseas rivals. There is a high degree of integration with the world economy, both in terms of investment and trade. But this integration is two-way, in the sense that Australia exports substantial quantities of capital and commodities. Ties with global capitalism have not been forced on Australia from outside, but have rather been sought out by Australian capitalists to further their own strategies of capital accumulation.42

Australia has also built up its military and diplomatic capacities to be commensurate with its modern, wealthy economy, and hence has a capacity to carve out its own place in the global order far in advance of the countries of the ‘Third World’. Critiques of Australian foreign policy as being fundamentally imperialist have appeared periodically.43 A recent restatement can be found in the work of O’Lincoln. He has briefly outlined a conception of Australia as an imperialist state, in which ‘Our rulers’ intention has always been to advance Australia’s own imperialist interests.44

The Australian colonies were established on the basis of Britain’s imperial power,45 and they developed into an independent nation state in the context of endemic international competition. A handful of white settlers occupied a geographically enormous land mass, which they assumed was also coveted by Germany, Russia, China and Japan, resulting in a racist and militarist response towards Asia in

---

42 For further detail, see Pietsch ‘Sam Pietsch, ‘To have and to hold on to’, pp. 35-36.
45 While the first colonies were founded specifically as penal dumping grounds, the very possibility of such a project depended on Britain’s maritime power and an awareness of the continent’s future economic potential. See Clark, ‘Australia: Victim or partner of British imperialism,’ pp. 51-52.
These security concerns were a major factor in the drive to Federation. Australia was therefore thrust into a world system of strategic competition from its earliest beginnings, and adopted the logic of this competition.

This has included state action to further the economic interests of Australian capitalists internationally, including securing opportunities for investment abroad and markets for exports. Overwhelmingly however, Australian foreign investment has been in the major centres of world capital accumulation. The United States and Britain together have been the destination for over 60% of total Australian capital exports, and other important outlets have been Western Europe and Japan. An exception is substantial investment in New Zealand. This activity has generally been unproblematic, and has not been a cause for great concern to Australian policy makers. Of more importance has been securing outlets for Australian exports, in particular primary commodities. But Australia’s main markets have generally been in developed (or rapidly developing) industrial countries, geographically remote from Australia itself. As a middle ranking power, Australia has had to rely on diplomacy to secure access to these markets, rather than the combination of diplomatic, economic, political and military intervention which is characteristic of imperialism.

In contrast, Australia undertakes a far more robust defence of its interests in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific, where its economic and military strength allow it to act as an imperial power. Australian interests in this immediate region do include commercial activities and investments, such as mineral extraction in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Primarily however, Australian imperialism is concerned with strategic objectives. Any incursion into Australia’s immediate surrounds by a major power is seen as a potential threat to Australia’s own territorial security, or to trade routes vital to Australia’s economy. By extension, Australia fears any political instability in countries such as Indonesia or PNG, which might provide an opening

---

46 This dynamic has been highlighted from a variety of theoretical perspectives. See Burke, In fear of security, chapter one; Donald Denoon, Settler capitalism: The dynamics of dependent development in the southern hemisphere, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 191-193; Phil Griffiths, ‘Racism: Whitewashing the class divide,’ in Class and struggle in Australia, ed. Rick Kuhn, Melbourne, Pearson Education Australia, 2005.

for a hostile power to gain influence. In particular, these concerns have dominated relations with Indonesia, as discussed in Chapter Two.

Again, such an account of Australian foreign policy shares with realist accounts a focus on Australia’s inability to extricate itself from the international system of competition without sacrificing key national interests. The prominence of the ‘realist moment’ in Australian imperialism is accentuated by the fact that Australia’s most important short-term interests in its immediate surrounds are political and military, rather than directly economic. Nonetheless, there are important differences between the two theoretical approaches. First, a Marxist approach highlights an irreconcilable division of class interests within the nation. The so-called ‘national interest’ in international affairs can never be anything more than the interests of the small minority who comprise Australia’s ruling class. The capitalist state acts in the long-term interests of this group, not an Australian people or nation which transcends class differences. Accordingly, not only can Australian imperialism be critiqued on ethical grounds, but nor has it served the interests of the bulk of the Australian population, even in the sense of ensuring basic levels of security. On the contrary, the potential for Australia to be drawn into devastating military conflict with major powers exists precisely because of the Australian ruling class’ participation in the general imperialist system.

Second, although a realist analysis may provide a generally accurate description of many day to day decisions of Australian foreign policy makers, realism’s generally uncritical support of the Australian policy status quo as inevitable need not be accepted. While a realist view of the modern international system may be roughly accurate in the short-term, a longer-term view reveals it to be historical and contingent. In Australia’s case, the ‘national interest’ has arisen from its foundations as a British colony and development into a modern capitalist economy, which has resulted in a nexus of military and trade relations with allied and competing states. And just as Australia’s current situation has historical roots, its ongoing existence is not predetermined, because it is possible that the international system’s foundation in the capitalist economic form will come to an end. Moreover, short of such a complete remaking of the international system, the everyday reality of international relations can also be profoundly reshaped by social transformations internal to nation
states, either within Australia itself or its neighbours, trade partners or strategic allies and rivals.

Taken together, these two departures from realism allows a Marxist approach to maintain a critical stance towards Australian foreign policy, where the state’s justifications of its actions as either ethical or non-negotiable are met with *prima facie* skepticism and a search for more fundamental causes, motivations and alternatives. This is not a purely moral or ethical question, but provides a fundamental intellectual perspective from which to assess concrete questions of foreign policy making. The final result of the interplay between the ‘realist moment’ and critical dimensions cannot be determined ahead of time, but must be determined in the course of concrete analysis.

World War Two, generally seen by both realists and liberals as a ‘good’ war in which Australia’s participation was necessary and justified, provides a good illustration of the workings of a Marxist account in this regard.\(^48\) Generally, Japan is thought of as the aggressor in the Pacific War, but the conflict actually resulted from the United States’ deliberate policy of choking off Japan’s supplies of raw materials. Both countries aimed at dominating the Asia-Pacific. As the weaker nation, Japan was maneuvered into striking first, hoping to use rapid territorial gains to counter the United States’ established industrial might. Controlling oil reserves located in the Dutch East Indies was seen as particularly vital. Australia could not avoid being drawn into the region-wide conflict. Japan’s invasion of Southeast Asia, and in particular the Indonesian archipelago, represented an existential threat from the Australian point of view. It destroyed the British empire in East Asia, in which Australia had economic interests, as well as bringing to an end the friendly Dutch presence in the East Indies. Going to war in alliance with the United States was the logical response.

The rest of this chapter discusses the history of Australia’s foreign relations since the end of World War Two, using the theoretical framework outlined above. Before doing so it is worth considering in greater depth two major themes in this history: whether Australia has been subject to domination by foreign powers, and the nature of Australia’s fraught relations with Asia.

---

\(^48\) A good account can be found in Humphrey McQueen, *Japan to the rescue*, Port Melbourne, William Heinemann, 1991, pp. 35-46, 273-283.
Foreign domination of Australia?

The example of World War Two highlights that while Australia is a significant force in its immediate region, it cannot hope to compete with major powers such as Japan, Russia or China. In this context, Australia’s attachment to ‘great and powerful friends’ has not arisen from a lack of national independence, but rather from a desire to further Australia’s own interests.

Although originating as colonies themselves, the leaderships of the Australian settlements developed a sense of shared interests long before attaining national unification or independence, and decades before the Commonwealth formally took over responsibility for foreign affairs through the ratification of the Statute of Westminster by the Federal Parliament in 1942. In the minds of Australian elites there was no contradiction between continued support for the British Empire and looking after Australia’s own interests. Rather than being a victim of foreign dominance then, Australia was an active participant in Britain’s wider imperial project, becoming a colonial power in its own right.

Indeed, Australian ambitions in the Southwest Pacific frequently surpassed the priorities of the mother-country. There was discussion in Australia over the need for Britain to colonise Fiji from the 1850s, but it was not until 1874 that this was achieved. Likewise, Australians showed interest in the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) from the late 1870s, but Britain only took control of the territory in 1906, in condominium with France. Most notably, the Queensland government attempted to unilaterally annex Southeast New Guinea in 1883, only for Britain to reject the move. The territory was, however, made a British protectorate in 1884, and annexed in 1888. From 1902 Australia took over the administration of Papua, as it became known. German-held (northern) New Guinea was added as an Australian spoil of war in 1914.

Colonial expansion served Australia’s own specific interests. Economically these included, at various times, the regional trading network of the Burns Philp company, heavy investment in the sugar industry in Fiji, the import of islander labour to work

---

49 In fact, the recognition of common interests in the international sphere were a major part of the development of Australian nationalism. See McQueen, *A new Britannia*, pp. 27-29, 35-37, 61-67.
50 See Ibid., pp. 21-41.
in Queensland agriculture, and the exploitation of phosphate deposits in Nauru. To operate efficiently, these concerns required the legal framework of British or Australian political authority, as well as protection from the designs of the other colonial powers. The other main motivation for Australia’s colonial expansion was strategic denial. Australian fears of French and Russian encroachment in the Pacific stretch back to the 1820s. Later, there were concerns over Germany and Japan. Increased strategic fears in the late 1870s provided a renewed impetus for the colonisation of Papua, and the desire to lock Japan out of the region was the primary motive for the absorption of New Guinea after World War One.

More recently, discussion of whether Australia suffers from the lack of an independent foreign policy has focused on ‘dependence’ on the United States. This thesis was dominant on the political Left during the 1960s and 1970s, reaching its most forceful expression in Camilleri’s 1980 depiction of a ‘web of dependence’. However the characterisation of ‘dependence’ was also adopted by realist scholar Coral Bell from the late 1980s, and since then it has come to be more or less accepted across the spectrum of debate.

Obviously, the relationship between Australia and the United States is an unequal one. Australia cannot hope to match the economic, diplomatic and military resources of the world’s only superpower. As a result, there are moments of the alliance in which Australia accepts a subordinate position. This is the situation, for example, in the Middle East, where Australian policy is one of almost total support for the US position, where Australia has little capacity and makes little effort to influence that policy, and where Australian support tends to be largely symbolic, consisting of diplomatic backing and minor contributions to US military undertakings. Likewise, Australia’s role within the United States’ strategic nuclear weapons and intelligence systems could be said to be ‘subordinate’. Australia accepts the benefits and risks of being a part of the network of US strategic intelligence and communications bases, but has little control over how these systems are developed or used.

---

52 Thompson, *Australian imperialism*, p. 8.
53 Ibid., pp. 60-62, 210-214.
54 Joseph A. Camilleri, *Australian-American relations: The web of dependence*, South Melbourne, Macmillan, 1980. In turn, such ideas drew on earlier radical critiques of Australia’s economic relations with Britain, as discussed above.
55 Bell, *Dependent ally: A study in Australian foreign policy*. For a useful discussion of the history of the ‘dependence’ approach, see Leaver, ‘Patterns of dependence in post-war Australian foreign policy,’ pp. 72-74.
This poses a challenge for the position of this thesis, that Australia works to defend its own, independent imperialist interests. How does this sit with participation in an unequal alliance with the world’s pre-eminent imperial power, which has its own interests to defend? Two points can be made. First, while at times Australian foreign policy has certainly been constrained by the need to maintain the alliance, with Australia’s exact freedom of maneuver differing from issue to issue. But such constraints have been willing accepted, rather than arising from United States’ pressure. Indeed, Australia has actually sought to encourage its ally to engage more deeply in Asia, due to the perceived alignment of interests between the two countries. Bell, for example, has singled out this ‘sense of… strategic dependency’ as the driving force behind Australia’s policy in Indochina in the mid 1960s. More recently, Tow identified a similar logic in Australian attempts to encourage positive US engagement with China. This situation can be contrasted to countries which have been given no choice whether or not they are drawn into the US imperial orbit, as with most Latin American nations, or in the case of South Korea after World War Two.

Second, there are moments of the alliance in which Australia plays an equal or even leading role. This occurs in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific where Australia has direct strategic and economic interests and far greater ability to defend them, and would need to do so regardless of the existence of the US alliance. From time to time Australia pursues a policy at odds to that of the United States in these regions. Most of the time, however, Australian and US interests in these regions broadly coincide, in that both want to maintain the status quo of regional power relations and prevent penetration by rival powers. In the South Pacific the US frequently looks to Australia to play the lead role in defending this joint interest. This, however, is a question of mutual convenience, not subordination.

As with earlier relations with imperial Britain then, the alliance does not imply an abnegation of distinct Australian interests, but is rather a logical strategic decision aimed at fulfilling those interests. Overall, realist writers have been correct to argue that the combination of technical benefits and strategic backing means that the US

56 Bell, Dependent ally: A study in Australian foreign policy, pp. 72-78.
alliance is a force multiplier of Australia’s own strategic weight. As Tow and Albinksi put it,

Australians have… not been exploited in their alliance relations with the US. ANZUS has contributed to Australia’s sense of security and self-confidence in the region, and allowed Australia to ‘punch above its own weight’. 58

If this is dependency, it is a dependency which has actually allowed a more aggressive diplomatic and strategic stance than would otherwise have been possible for Australia. Perhaps a more useful description of the relationship would be a ‘partnership’, where Australia may be the junior partner, but nonetheless derives substantial benefit from the association in the pursuit of its own ambitions.

**Australia’s relationship with Asia**

Whether or not the alliance with the United States is justified, however, ultimately rests on an assessment of the causes of Australia’s longstanding strategic fears about its Asian neighbours. 59 Even now, when there is widespread consensus that Australia must ‘engage’ with Asia, all sides in the foreign policy debate have a keen sense of a dislocation between Australia’s geographic location and its cultural and political identity. As Higgott and Nossal argue, while the certainties of an Anglo-centric 1950s are no longer possible, a new reality based on full integration with Asia remains ‘tantalisingly, beyond reach…’ 60 Following Huntington, 61 ex-diplomat Rawdon Dalrymple considers Australia a test case for whether a country can safely exist surrounded by alien cultures, arguing that ‘Few peoples have had so much difficulty in defining themselves in regional terms or in reconciling themselves to their location as have the Australians.’ 62

Other commentators, particularly but not only on the political Left, dismiss such fears, but their centrality to policy is emphasised nonetheless. For example, Cheeseman sees Australian security policy as based on a series of non-existent threats, which ultimately relate to the ‘view that Australia is basically defenceless

58 Tow and Albinksi, ‘ANZUS alive and well after fifty years,’ p. 161.
59 From the point of view of Australian policy making, ‘Asia’ here refers almost exclusively to Northeast and Southeast Asia.
against the weight of Asian numbers, and that it must therefore look to others for protection." Burke has provided the most perceptive study of this sense of insecurity, arguing that in Australia

security is imagined on the basis of a bounded and vulnerable identity in perpetual opposition to an outside – an Other – whose character and claims threaten its integrity and safety.

This ‘Other’ has overwhelmingly been Asian, revealing the racist underpinnings of Australian foreign and security policy.

This general sense of unease does not point to a psychological or intellectual failing among Australians. Rather, it indicates an instance where ‘the territorial and capitalist logics of power’ not only have some autonomy from each other, but are contradictory ‘to the point of outright antagonism.’

This situation has only developed since World War Two. Until the mid 1960s, Australia’s policy towards Asia was dominated by security concerns, and hence could comfortably be contained within a defence/military framework. Most importantly, the US alliance was initially sought as protection from Japan, and later China and other ‘Communist’ inspired national liberation movements. Australia’s prime contact with Asian countries during this period was through military deployments, which were seen as buttressing the alliance.

However, starting in the 1960s, first Japan, then South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong, and most recently China became crucial export markets for Australian capitalism, as shown in Table 1.1. By 1970-1971, over 30% of Australian merchandise exports were destined for East Asia, rising to well over half the total by 1990-1991, a process described in detail below. These countries no longer simply represented a threat, to be dealt with in military terms, but also an economic

---

63 Graeme Cheeseman, ‘Back to ‘Forward Defence’ and the Australian national style,’ in Discourses of danger & dread frontiers: Australian defence and security thinking after the Cold War, ed. Graeme Cheeseman, St Leonards, 1996, p. 262. See also McDougall, Australian foreign relations, pp. 6-8; Smith, Cox, and Burchill, Australia in the world: An introduction to Australian foreign policy, pp. 25-6. For a similar argument from a realist perspective, see Alan Dupont, Australia’s threat perceptions: A search for security, Canberra, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 1991, pp. 90-96.
64 Burke, In fear of security, pp. xxiii-xxiv.
65 Harvey, The new imperialism, p. 29.
opportunity. In particular, newly industrialising economies provided an increasingly important outlet for Australia’s principle exports of raw commodities.

Yet precisely because of their new found strength (or rather their return to great power status), Australia has not unambiguously viewed Japan and China as friends. Rather, they have remained strategic threats because they have sought to enhance their own power in the region, and might even eventually pose a threat to the military dominance of the United States. Strategic stability in the wider region is seen as vital for Australia’s economic wellbeing and long-term strategic viability. Even relatively limited conflict could disrupt Australia’s export markets or trade routes, and ultimately Chinese or Japanese power in the region could undermine Australia’s freedom of action within Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. No matter how unlikely or distant a prospect such conflict seems at any given time, their possibility can never be discounted when considering Australia’s long-term strategic orientation. These considerations of great power rivalries were to have a major impact on Australia’s policy in East Timor and the Southwest Pacific from 1999, as discussed in Chapters Six and Seven.

For Australia, the simplest guarantee of stability and status quo power relations in Asia is continued United States dominance. As a result, the perceived need for the ANZUS alliance has not diminished among Australian policy makers. None of this is to argue, however, that Australia’s stance might not change in the future. As Leaver notes, the US is actually a competitor with Australia in many export markets, and Australia also runs a large trade deficit with its alliance partner. This contrasts with the situation of Australia’s previous alliance with the United Kingdom, in which economic reciprocity bound the empire as much as military considerations.67 Moreover, the US alliance can itself complicate relations with Asian countries, because they do not view the alliance with equanimity. In particular, Australia will face difficult choices about where its loyalties lie if the US-China relationship deteriorates in the future.68

Table 1.1: Australian exports to selected markets, 1948-2005, as a percentage of total exports\(^69\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>20.8(a)</td>
<td>15.8(a)</td>
<td>9.9(a)</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) EEC, excludes United Kingdom. (b) financial year averages. (c) weighted total of merchandise and service exports.

2. Australian foreign relations from 1945 to the Vietnam War

It would not be the first time that great power conflict in Asia had forced a realignment of Australian foreign policy. The fall of Britain’s Singapore stronghold in February 1942 undermined the basis of Australian foreign policy thinking since colonial times. Britain’s strength had always been seen as the guarantor of Australia’s precarious position as a white enclave amongst a host of threatening Asian states, particularly China and Japan. The Empire’s sudden collapse prompted Australia to seek a new great power ally in the United States. At the same time, successive governments attempted to balance Australia’s specific interests with their commitment to the new alliance, within an increasingly restrictive Cold War environment.70

All the way with the USA?

Prime Minister Curtin announced in December 1942 that ‘Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.’71 In fact, Australia had looked furtively towards the United States as an ally since at least the 1905 defeat of Russia by Japan and the 1908 visit of the US ‘Great White Fleet’ to Australian shores, but these glances had not been reciprocated. Now, sharing both a mutual enemy and rhetoric of the defence of freedom and democracy, the US seemed the natural choice to take over from Britain as Australia’s great and powerful friend.

Australia’s ties to Britain, though, were not abandoned overnight. Economically, Australia retained ties to Britain’s sterling area, and Chifley’s government was at best ambivalent regarding US plans for a multilateral trading system. Accordingly, Australia sided with Britain during the 1947 sterling crisis. Important defence ties were also maintained with Britain; Australian forces were deployed in Malaya from 1950-1960 and in the newly independent Malaysia from 1963-1966 in support of the British position. Although the ANZUS treaty was signed in 1951, in 1954 Australia

70 For a very useful survey of developments in this regard up to 1960, see David McLean, ‘From British colony to American satellite? Australia and the USA during the Cold War,’ Australian Journal of Politics and History 54, no. 1 (2006).
still saw the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO, comprising Australia, France, Britain, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and the United States) as its preferred security framework, due to the involvement of the European powers.\footnote{Richard Leaver, ‘The evolution of an Asia-Pacific policy community in Australia,’ The Pacific Review 8, no. 1 (1995), p. 175; Leaver, ‘Patterns of dependence in post-war Australian foreign policy,’ p. 79; David Lee, Search for security: the political economy of Australia’s postwar foreign and defence policy, St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 1995, pp. 6, 161-166.}

Gradually though, Australia was pulled into the United States’ orbit as the Cold War intensified. In the early 1950s Menzies began withdrawing from economic reliance on the sterling bloc. The humiliating back down of Britain and France during the Suez Crisis of 1956 provided further evidence of their decline compared to the United States. SEATO became increasingly irrelevant due to Europe’s waning power in the region, and the United States’ ambivalence towards the organisation. The opening of US military communications bases in Australia in the 1960s added weight to the defence relationship, and by the time Britain formally declared in 1968 that it was withdrawing from its possessions ‘East of Suez’, the US alliance had already become the mainstay of Australia’s defence strategy.\footnote{Leaver, ‘Patterns of dependence in post-war Australian foreign policy,’ pp. 80-81; Lee, Search for security, pp. 164-167.}

Although the United States replaced Britain as Australia’s great power benefactor, Australian policy was not subordinated to US interests. Indeed, ANZUS itself was initially an expression of disharmony between the allies. The US had decided that Japan could be rehabilitated as an ally against the Soviet Union, and hence wished to redevelop its economy. In contrast, Australia favoured a harsh peace treaty, as it continued to see Japan as a strategic threat. ANZUS was intended to assuage Australian fears through the promise of US military support, and was seen as a condition for Australian acceptance of US plans for the reconstruction of Japan.\footnote{See Tow and Albinski, ‘ANZUS alive and well after fifty years,’ p. 157.}

Australia continued to seek maximum room for maneuver within the limits of the ANZUS alliance framework over the next two decades. In fact, Leaver argues convincingly that during the 1950s and 60s Australia actually attempted to limit US power within the post-war security structures Washington had hoped to dominate.\footnote{Leaver, ‘Patterns of dependence in post-war Australian foreign policy,’ pp. 76-77.}
positions on Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the Taiwan Straits crises of the 1950s, and a refusal to offer full support to the Kuomintang regime in Taiwan, an ambiguity which allowed continued trade relations with mainland China. Australia also directly confronted the United States over the issue of Indonesian incorporation of the Dutch held West Papua in 1961-62. As discussed in the following chapter, Australia was determined that the territory, which shared a border with Australian controlled Papua New Guinea, should not fall to the Indonesians, while the US were willing to support Indonesia’s claim in order to counter Soviet influence with Sukarno.

Australia was left isolated over its West Papua position, however, and its stance shifted from moderating US policy in Indochina to actually encouraging greater aggression. This move was particularly prompted by SEATO’s irrelevance in containing Sukarno’s Indonesia, of which Australia was increasingly wary. Accordingly, Australia came to side with US hawks to encourage Washington’s deepening involvement in Vietnam, and granted the US rights to build spy and communications bases in Australia, without any direct payoff in security terms, or even financially through rent. As Leaver argues, ANZUS was a flimsy framework on which to build Australia’s entire defence policy:

To increase its load-bearing capacity, Coalition governments therefore adopted ultra-loyalist stances vis-à-vis Washington. This entailed far more than a policy of simply agreeing with whatever it was that the American policy of the day might be: it called for an active Australian attempt to mould its own policy into a form that would ensure America’s satisfaction of immediate Australian concerns.

The rise of Asian nationalism

Labor’s post-war period in office is sometimes viewed as the classic period of liberal internationalism in Australian foreign policy making, where the emphasis was on the rule of international law and multilateral forums such as the United Nations (UN). In particular Minister of External Affairs Evatt is seen as the model liberal-

---


77 Leaver, ‘Patterns of dependence in post-war Australian foreign policy,’ pp. 79-82.

78 Ibid., p. 81.
internationalist. Labor’s record on the colonial issue should dispel this image. Prior to World War Two, Australia supported European colonialism throughout Southeast Asia, as it kept the region bound up in a relatively stable system dominated by Britain. The main concern was that the weaker European powers might not be able to maintain their position. The system also buttressed Australia’s retention of its own colonial possessions of Papua New Guinea.

The collapse of the European powers in the face of Japan’s advance ended this stability. Nor, with the rise of Asian nationalist movements, was a simple re-occupation possible for the European powers following Japan’s defeat. One by one the Philippines (1946), Indonesia (1949), Vietnam (1954) and Malaysia (1963) gained independence, confronting Australia with an entirely new situation in Southeast Asia.

Nonetheless, Australian policy makers in the post-war period continued to see colonial empires as the preferred mode of Western dominance in the region. Evatt had already proposed in 1943 that the United States and Australia split the Pacific region between them, with Australia taking control of all Pacific islands south of the equator, including Timor, Fiji and the whole of New Guinea. The proposal was rejected as a limitation on US plans in the region. Although it acquiesced in the reinstatement of the European powers following Japan’s defeat, the US did not seek a formal empire for itself, granting independence to the Philippines in 1946. The pattern of Cold War power blocs was to be one of alliances between formally independent nations, rather than outright occupation by the superpowers. Only after the defeat over West Papua did Australian policy finally move into line with the US in this respect.

79 This attitude can be found across the political spectrum. For example, see Bell, ‘Political objectives,’ p. 68; Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant, Australia’s foreign relations in the world of the 1990s, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1991, p. 23; Kent, ‘Human rights,’ p. 163; John Pilger, A secret country, 2 ed., London, Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1992, pp. 156-157.
83 With the exception of US occupation of Pacific territories such as the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, which were directly occupied by the US for strategic purposes.
Labor did, however, accommodate Asian nationalism when forced to do so by events on the ground. As discussed in the following chapter, Australia came to play a constructive role in the victory of the Indonesian independence movement. But the opportunity to further develop relations with Australia’s new neighbour was not taken up by Menzies. Instead, Australia’s stance towards Asia remained one of apprehension, arising from distrust of the newly independent nations, which from 1949 was tied up in the minds of Australian policy makers with the perceived threat of a Communist menace emanating from China. The response in the 1950s and 60s was the doctrine of ‘forward defence’, in which Australia would join with its allies Britain and the United States to defeat Communist and nationalist insurgencies, before they could threaten Australia itself. The logic of anti-Communism came to be the dominant force in Australian foreign policy thinking.

Australia’s economic and political links with Asia

Despite Australia’s original hostility to a reconstructed Japan, the former enemy soon became essential to Australia’s own economic wellbeing. From the early 1950s onwards, Britain absorbed a decreasing proportion of Australia’s exports. The main replacement for this export market was Japan, which overtook Britain as Australia’s most important market in 1966-67. Exports were initially dominated by wool, but included increased amounts of minerals and coal from the 1960s, as the Japanese economy developed. Japan’s share of Australian exports continued to increase until 1976-77, when it accounted for 34% of the total. Despite some decline in importance from the late 1970s, Japan has retained its position as Australia’s leading export destination (see Table 1.1).

Australia’s political engagement with Japan, however, lagged behind its increase in economic importance, due to ongoing strategic fears. This contradiction between strategic threat and economic opportunity in the one country was nothing new. The perceived strategic threat to Australia in the 20th century has been from rapidly modernising and industrialising Asian states, Japan then China. But given Australia’s economic reliance on the export of raw commodities, that strategic threat has also been a potential economic partner. Japan had presented the same problem before

---

84 McDougall, *Australian foreign relations*, pp. 7-8.
World War Two, played out domestically in the debate over whether to profit from the export of iron, at the potential cost of later confronting that same iron transformed into the weapons of the Japanese military machine.

In the post-war period, the contradiction was even more sharply evident in relations with China. Although part of the ‘Communist bloc’ from 1949, Australia tried to strengthen economic ties with a country supposedly engaged in a life and death struggle with democratic nations. In this, Australian policy differed substantially from its US ally. Indeed, Menzies considered formally recognising the Beijing regime, but held back because of the potential damage this would cause to the relationship with the United States. Although China and Hong Kong became important wheat markets there was little other progress, and, apart from Japan, economic interaction with Asia was generally stagnant during the 1950s and 1960s.86

There was also some attempt to deal at a political level with the newly independent Asian nations. To encourage personal links, Australia joined the Colombo plan, whereby Asian students studied at Australian universities, and there was official encouragement of diplomatic and business ties within Asia. ‘Asian studies’ was established as an academic discipline, particularly at the Australian National University (ANU), to provide business and government with the skills and knowledge necessary to interact with the region. Ultimately though, such ties were always subordinated to the anti-Communist strategic framework.87

**The Vietnam War**

Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War was the logical culmination of the policy of forward defence. Particularly on the populist Left, Australia is often seen as having been dragged into Vietnam due to its subordination of Australian national interests to those of the United States.88 This is not the case. In fact, the Australian government did all it could to encourage the hawks in the US establishment to become further involved in Indochina, no matter how ineffectual these efforts may have been. Likewise, Menzies actively sought acceptance from the United States and

---

88 For example, Phillips, *Ambivalent allies*, pp. 134-135; Pilger, *A secret country*, pp. 175-183. These explanations were also dominant amongst the Left at the time of the war. See Kuhn, ‘The Australian left.’
South Vietnamese governments of what was an essentially token force of Australian troops.\textsuperscript{89}

Such a commitment was seen as encouraging the ongoing engagement of the US in the region, which in turn was considered vital for the protection of Australia’s national interests. As Bell puts it:

‘The Australian intellectual establishment as a whole, up to 1967… were on balance predominantly disposed to believe that the Australian national interest required a strong American commitment in Southeast Asia, and that a token Australian presence was warranted or necessary to secure that objective.’\textsuperscript{90}

The defeat in Vietnam once again placed Australian foreign policy in a situation of uncertainty. This was similar to the immediate post-World War Two situation, when Australia had been forced to develop a more complex foreign policy, due to the loss of the relative stability brought by the British imperial system. The response was to turn to an alliance with the United States, while frequently differing with Washington over specific issues where Australian interests were concerned. While not completely undermining this policy, Vietnam exposed the weaknesses of over-reliance on a superpower for regional security. Dealing with the decline of US power in the region following its withdrawal from Indochina became a major concern for Australia.

\section*{3. Whitlam, Fraser and Cold War realignment}

The looming defeat of the United States in Vietnam was marked by Nixon’s pronouncement of the ‘Guam Doctrine’ in July 1969. In essence, the doctrine stated that US allies should not rely on the superpower being involved in every regional conflict, and that they should therefore look to their own security in conflicts short of full scale war between the US and the USSR.\textsuperscript{91} Shortly after, the gold standard, which had hitched the market economies to American economic leadership, was abandoned. These dual policies were a recognition that economic and military


\textsuperscript{90} Bell, \textit{Dependent ally: A study in Australian foreign policy}, pp. 72-73.

setbacks had weakened the United States’ hegemonic position with the Western alliance.\(^9^2\) The early 1970s also saw détente between the US and both the USSR and China. Of particular significance to Australia was Nixon and Kissinger’s realisation that China could be an ally against Russia, supposed ideological affinities notwithstanding.

These policies negated the logic of Australia’s ‘forward defence’ policy, which was based on fighting alongside alliance partners against a supposed ‘Communist bloc’. At the same time, US détente with China removed some of the restrictions on foreign policy which were present during the Menzies era.\(^9^3\) The Liberal Party, however, was politically unable to take advantage of this room for manoeuvre, as it would have meant repudiating their policy stance of the previous decade. The Liberals were therefore increasingly out of touch on foreign policy issues, a situation epitomised by their criticism of Whitlam for visiting China, just months before Nixon himself did so, and indeed after Kissinger had made his secret visit.\(^9^4\) In contrast, Whitlam appeared to have adopted a bold new approach fitting a less predictable world.

**Whitlam: an independent foreign policy?**

Among enthusiasts, Whitlam’s foreign policy is still seen as a period of national awakening, in which Australia finally made moves towards an ‘independent’ foreign policy.\(^9^5\) This is correct insofar as Whitlam was prepared to risk a more activist foreign policy stance and strove to forge stronger links with Asian nations. But the underlying cause of the change in policy was the weakening of the US position in Asia, rather than an increased national awareness amongst the Labor government. Whitlam’s actions were actually driven by the desire to serve the very same ‘national interest’ as the Liberals, by maintaining regional stability and pursuing commercial opportunities. As Leaver argues, given the US’s new Guam Doctrine, Whitlam’s ‘independent’ stance was in fact more in tune with US strategy than the politics of his Liberal counterparts, before or after.\(^9^6\)

\(^9^2\) Leaver, ‘Patterns of dependence in post-war Australian foreign policy,’ p. 84.  
\(^9^3\) McDougall, *Australian foreign relations*, pp. 9-10.  
\(^9^4\) Leaver, ‘Patterns of dependence in post-war Australian foreign policy,’ pp. 84-85.  
\(^9^6\) Leaver, ‘Patterns of dependence in post-war Australian foreign policy,’ p. 88.
Whitlam’s most important policy shift was to place Australia in a more constructive relationship with Asia. This was made possible by the US-China détente, as China was no longer seen as a major threat to Australian security. Some elements of this policy actually began under the Liberals, in particular the (formal) ending of the White Australia policy. In his relations with Asian nations, Whitlam certainly was not constrained by any ‘socialist’ principles. He developed new links with dictatorial regimes of both the purported Left in Mao’s China, and the Right in Suharto’s Indonesia, and he ‘was not much constrained by any revulsion from the authoritarian, anti-democratic, anti-human rights aspects of either.’

Formal links were also established with the bloc of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), although membership was not sought, backed by a new program of Australian financial aid. Although Australia’s trade pattern remained stable during the early to mid 1970s, Whitlam’s new approach paved the way for increased trade with Asia in the late 1970s and into the 1980s.

In military affairs Whitlam’s response to the Guam Doctrine was ambiguous. Due to the increased uncertainties of US backing for Australia’s position in the region, moves were made, at least conceptually, towards defence self-reliance. But Australian troops remained stationed in Malaysia and Singapore. Most importantly, there was no radical change to the relationship with the US. If anything, Whitlam’s renegotiation of ‘joint control’ over the US bases ensured long term support for the alliance, by effectively depoliticising the issue.

These continuities were not simply a holdover from the past and proof that, in the words of Bell, ‘The habits of dependence died hard…’ Rather, they expressed a deeper continuity with past policy. Where US interests could be relied on to align with those of Australia, stress would be on the alliance – where they could not, Australia would need to act on its own. The US alliance could no longer be relied on to as great an extent as previously, but it was certainly not to be discarded entirely.

97 Dalrymple, Continental drift: Australia’s search for a regional identity, p. 63. Whitlam’s relationship with Indonesia is discussed in detail in the following chapter.
100 Leaver, ‘Patterns of dependence in post-war Australian foreign policy,’ p. 86.
101 Bell, Dependent ally: A study in Australian foreign policy, p. 178.
A new policy consensus

Outwardly, Fraser’s foreign policy seemed a return to a traditional Liberal Cold War stance, as he put great emphasis on the threat posed by Russian Communism. He even proposed that, given the US’s reluctance to engage in the region, Australia might have to take the lead in confronting the Communist menace. The subsequent Soviet aggression in Afghanistan seemed to justify Fraser’s position, and he strongly supported the American response.\(^\text{102}\)

One result of Fraser’s strong anti-Soviet stance was an increased focus on regional security, which continued under Labor in the 1980s. Always seen as Australia’s sphere of influence by right, the South Pacific came to be perceived as vulnerable to Soviet interference under the conditions of heightened Cold War tensions. Thus

> Any Soviet diplomatic or economic link with a South Pacific state was to be seen as the thin edge of the wedge – a possible stepping stone to a military base or Soviet-influenced island government which could either be a launching point for attack on Australia or on Australia’s sea lines of communication.\(^\text{103}\)

Accordingly, financial aid to Pacific island nations was doubled after the USSR offered assistance to Tonga in 1976, and was doubled again after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

Overall however, the continuities with the Whitlam period were more important than Fraser’s renewed rhetorical stress on anti-Communism. Indeed, having established his anti-Communist credentials, Fraser became somewhat more relaxed later in his term in office.\(^\text{104}\) The strategy of military self-reliance was made more explicit in the 1976 Defence White Paper,\(^\text{105}\) although the seemingly incongruous overseas troop deployments remained. Most importantly, Fraser continued Whitlam’s new approach to relations with Asian nations, building economic and diplomatic ties in the region,

\(^\text{102}\) Camilleri, States, markets and civil society in Asia Pacific: the political economy of the Asia-Pacific region, p. 300; Leaver, ‘Patterns of dependence in post-war Australian foreign policy,’ p. 87-88.


\(^\text{104}\) See Leaver, ‘Patterns of dependence in post-war Australian foreign policy,’ p. 88.

rather than reacting to perceived threats with a predominantly military response. In particular, there was ongoing attention to fostering ties with China, which was now seen as a counter to Russia, rather than a threat to Australia. This shift, which was a bipartisan consensus, was the most enduring effect on Australian policy from the decline in US power in the Asia-Pacific.

4. ‘Oddest man in’: Labor’s Asian engagement

The Hawke and Keating Labor governments retained the general policy re-orientations of Whitlam and then Fraser, but they were expressed more consciously and given a greater intellectual coherence. Particularly under Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, foreign policy was marked by a new confidence that Australia was capable of carving out its own place in Asia. Yet Australia’s enthusiastic participation in the first Gulf War highlighted continued strategic and political ties with the United States; ties which were increasingly in contradiction with Australia’s economic interests and geographic location in Asia.

**Self-reliance within alliance**

Labor’s first policy innovation was ‘self-reliance within the alliance framework’, articulated through the 1986 Defence Review, conducted by ANU academic Paul Dibb, and the 1987 Defence White Paper. The new strategic posture represented a more complete response to the Guam Doctrine, a way of justifying an ‘independent’ defence stance. Crucially, it was now openly stated for the first time that Australia was capable of defending itself against any potential adversary, short of a full-scale attack by either of the world’s superpowers, which was unlikely to say the least. In fact, defence experts were now so confident of Australia’s military capacity that they could claim that 10% of the earth’s surface was of ‘direct military interest’ to Australia. This area stretched from the Cocos Islands in the West to New Zealand...

---

106 Camilleri, States, markets and civil society in Asia Pacific: the political economy of the Asia-Pacific region, pp. 300-301; Dalrymple, Continental drift: Australia’s search for a regional identity, pp. 68-72.
108 There were some differences between the two documents, with Dibb’s policy of limiting troop deployments to continental Australia and its immediate approaches dismissed as too defensive by the Defence bureaucracy, but the essential elements of the policy were common to both papers. The defence of Australia, p. 144; Paul Dibb, Review of Australia’s defence capabilities, Department of Defence, 1986.
and the South Pacific islands in the east, and extended to Papua New Guinea and Indonesia to the north. Even this did not ‘mark the limits of our strategic interests nor of our military capabilities’, as Australia was also concerned with affairs further afield in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia.\footnote{The defence of Australia, p. 2.} At the same time, Dibb advocated a military ‘strategy of denial’ within this area of interest, focused on defending the Australian continent, but not excluding interdiction strikes in the immediate region.\footnote{Dibb, Review of Australia’s defence capabilities, p. 5.}

Within this framework, the US alliance was certainly not abandoned, although its overall importance was downplayed. While any threat to the Australian mainland, short of nuclear attack, would have to be managed by Australia on its own, the alliance was still seen as important as a source of intelligence, technology and training. But this support was now considered an essential basis for ‘independence’.\footnote{The defence of Australia, pp. 4-5; Dibb, Review of Australia’s defence capabilities, p. 4; Richard Leaver, ‘Australia’s Gulf commitment: The end of self-reliance?’ The Pacific Review 4, no. 3 (1991), p. 233.} Such paradoxes notwithstanding, ‘self-reliance within alliance’ was a coherent expression of developments in Australia’s strategic position. It publicly acknowledged what Department of Defence personnel had privately thought since the mid 1970s, and finally responded to the fact that, in relative terms, US power had diminished from the peak of the Cold War.\footnote{Burchill, Australia’s international relations: Particular, common and universal interests, pp. 54-55; Camilleri, States, markets and civil society in Asia Pacific: the political economy of the Asia-Pacific region, p. 301-302; Leaver, ‘The evolution of an Asia-Pacific policy community in Australia,’ p. 180.}

The first practical application of the new policy, however, revealed the limitations of Labor’s innovation regarding the US alliance. In a scenario strikingly similar to Australia’s entry into the Vietnam conflict, Australia’s involvement in the 1991 Gulf War was initiated by Canberra, rather than by the Bush Senior administration.\footnote{Cheeseman, The search for self-reliance: Australian defence since Vietnam, p. 23.} Australia’s attachment to the US insurance policy was alive and well, despite the tensions this caused with other nations in Australia’s region.\footnote{Burchill, Australia’s international relations: Particular, common and universal interests, p. 56.}

Moreover, Australian policy makers continued to see US engagement in the Asia-Pacific as vital to Australia’s interests. Because of the nature of its export oriented economy, Australia depended on US engagement to ensure economic and military...
stability amongst its regional trading partners. Strategic analyst Des Ball argues that the US alliance was now, ‘somewhat paradoxically’, crucial for Australian independence. According to Evans himself, United States leadership has been, certainly since World War II, a crucial ingredient in the economic growth and relative strategic stability of the Asia Pacific region.

Overall, while Labor’s approach to defense did constitute genuine innovation, significant elements of the Cold War policy remained.

**Australia faces the ‘Northeast Asian ascendancy’**

If Labor reduced the emphasis on Australia’s relations with the United States, at least intellectually, the corollary was an increased stress on the importance of relations within the Asian region. Labor called for a fundamental readjustment of these relations, arguing that Australia must ‘become a significant partner to the region, an accepted and natural participant in regional affairs.’ This directly challenged previous notions of Asia as threatening and culturally alien. Attempting to sidestep the debate about whether Australia could be defined as ‘Asian’, Foreign Minister Evans argued that Asia was a culturally diverse place anyway, so this should be no barrier to Australian integration; ‘we no longer need be the odd man out in Asia – even if we are destined to be the oddest man in.’ Despite these assurances, exactly how Australia’s relation to Asia should be described became the subject of considerable debate, as did the notion of ‘Asian values’ and whether or not Australia held them. Labor was eventually drawn into a series of somewhat tortured descriptions, including the idea that Australia was part of an ‘East Asian hemisphere’, and that ‘mateship’ was an Asian value.

Ultimately though, the debate over how to describe Australia’s relations with Asia had little impact on the underlying reality of why the debate was taking place in first place. This was, quite simply, a question of economic imperatives. As shown in Table 1.1, Asia’s share as a market for Australian exports began to rise throughout

---

115 For a summary of the argument, see Albinski, ‘Australia and the United States,’ pp. 188-191.
118 Gareth Evans, *Australia’s regional security*, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1989, p. 44.
119 Evans and Grant, *Australia’s foreign relations in the world of the 1990s*, p. 327.
120 From Evans and Keating respectively. Cited in, respectively, Camilleri, ‘The Howard years: Cultural ambivalence and political dogma,’ section 4; Dalrymple, *Continental drift: Australia’s search for a regional identity*, p. 119.
this period. Japan’s relative decline as a market in the 1990s was more than compensated for by the rise of the Newly Industrialised Countries (NICs) from the 1970s onwards, including Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and above all South Korea, which was Australia’s third largest merchandise export market by 1990-91.

In 1989 the government published a report by academic economist Ross Garnaut on Australia’s economic links with the region. Using a neo-classical economic model, Garnaut argued that Northeast Asia was the dynamic centre of world economic growth. Australia could piggyback on this success, but only if protectionism was abandoned and the economy geared towards competitive exports, therefore

we must accelerate progress in domestic economic reform, to build a flexible, internationally-oriented economy that is capable of grasping the opportunities that will emerge in the decades ahead.121

Despite criticism of some elements of the report, Garnaut’s underlying argument became the accepted consensus in the policy bureaucracy. Even the Liberal opposition, while deriding the idea of Australia as an Asian nation, were in agreement with Labor on the practical need for economic ties with the region.122

Significantly, some of the most ardent supporters of the new approach to Asia were on the Right wing of the political and economic policy spectrums. Commentator Greg Sheridan welcomed a

revolution… within the Australian psyche and also within Australia’s material circumstances… it is a transformation of the spirit and the body. I speak of the Asianisation of Australian life.123

Fitzgerald was not so optimistic. Writing after the election of the Howard government he bemoaned Australia’s inadequate response to the ‘Asianisation of Asia’. But he still dreamed of Australia as a ‘honey-coloured society’ playing a leading role in an ‘East Asian Community’.124

---

'Middle power diplomacy’ and the New World Disorder

Labor’s approach to defence and regional engagement was underpinned by the notion of ‘middle power diplomacy’. This doctrine, expounded most comprehensively in a 1991 book co-authored by Evans, held that Australia is a country too small to dictate terms to other nations, but large enough to have an impact within an international framework based on the rule of law and multilateral institutions:

As a liberal democracy, and a nation with neither the military capability nor the desire to impose its will on its neighbours, Australia has a particular interest in the development of an international civil society.125

The middle power approach called for ‘comprehensive engagement’ between Australia and the Asian region, involving not only military, but also diplomatic and economic linkages. Underpinned by the liberal notion that ‘security is best achieved with others, not against them’,126 the aim was to create a ‘set of relationships, and networks of interdependence’127 in which military conflict would hurt the interests of all parties. This was a departure from previous Australian strategic thinking about Asia, which had focused almost exclusively on militarily defense against inevitable threats emanating from the region.128

Labor’s new approach accorded with general optimism about the post-Cold War period. Older certainties about structuring foreign relations through superpower alliances gave way to more complex relations based on economic and diplomatic ties. This gave rise to the idea of a ‘New World Order’, an ‘era of peaceful cooperation, not only between and among the major economic and military powers but also in the periphery’.129 Evans mused that ‘a new mood of optimism about the future does generally prevail’.130 This optimism was not restricted to liberals; realist scholar Bell argued that ‘something very close to a new world order is in fact

125 Evans and Grant, *Australia’s foreign relations in the world of the 1990s*, p. 144.
127 Evans and Grant, *Australia’s foreign relations in the world of the 1990s*, p. 107.
128 This significance is missed by George, who dismisses the engagement policy as simply a variant of ‘neo-realism’. See George, ‘Quo vadis Australia? Framing the defence and security debate beyond the Cold War,’ p. 13.
130 Evans and Grant, *Australia’s foreign relations in the world of the 1990s*, p. 10.
emerging’, in which the United States’ leadership would maintain a peaceful global system.\textsuperscript{131} As Leaver notes, the middle power stance was a break from Australia’s previous ambivalence towards multilateral institutions.\textsuperscript{132} As such, it was predicated on an unprecedented confidence ‘that Australia, whether by accident or design, now had a greater margin of manoeuvre in shaping its regional relationships.’\textsuperscript{133} This confidence was reflected in Australia’s substantial role in the United Nations’ efforts to end the Cambodian civil war from 1991.\textsuperscript{134} More fundamentally, Australia invested a great deal of effort in multi-lateral regional bodies such as the nascent Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Evans even claimed, somewhat contentiously, that Australia was responsible for getting APEC off the ground.\textsuperscript{135} The payoff for such efforts was meant to come in freer market conditions for Australia’s exports.

Australia’s approach to APEC drew some positive responses, in particular from major trading partner Japan. Economic ties with some individual Asian countries were also enhanced during this period, most notably China, South Korea and Tai\u2014wan. But, despite some increase in trade, Australia’s interaction with Southeast Asia remained largely at the political and strategic level, with Singapore the only individual ASEAN country of significant economic importance for Australia.\textsuperscript{136} Ultimately, APEC’s accomplishments were limited.

More importantly, the strategic assumptions underpinning the policy soon began to unravel. By the mid to late 1990s, the New World Order was starting to look far more like 19th century Europe, in which a multiplicity of powers contested for economic and territorial advantage.\textsuperscript{137} The Western powers had failed to address

\textsuperscript{133} Camilleri, \textit{States, markets and civil society in Asia Pacific: the political economy of the Asia-Pacific region}, p. 303.
\textsuperscript{134} See \textit{Cambodia: An Australian peace proposal}, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1990.
seemingly intractable problems of global poverty and conflict, especially in the case of the break-up of Yugoslavia.

In Asia, the rise of China as a major power largely ended the belief in a new era of regional peace. From the early 1990s, Australian strategic analysts expressed concern about China’s rapid economic growth and increases in defence spending, as well as its more aggressive stance over issues such as territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The Cold War basis for the shaky alliance between China and the Western powers had disappeared. Potentially, China might even come to challenge the power of the United States in the region.138 Dibb summarised Australia’s concerns in 1997:

if some, or all, of the ASEAN countries fall effectively under Chinese influence then the projection of Chinese power directly into Australia’s own neighbourhood becomes a credible prospect.139

References to China in the 1994 Defence White Paper were veiled, noting only China’s economic and military power. But at the same time, it was stressed that ‘Our defence relationship with Indonesia is our most important in the region’ due to its role as a barrier to potentially hostile nations, and in 1995 Australia concluded a security treaty with Indonesia, the first of its kind.140 Prime Minister Keating indicated that the aim was to prevent Australia being drawn into ‘the Chinese orbit’.141

Although it remained the firm alliance partner of the United States and Australia, Japan was another potential threat to Australian interests, since its economic and military strength made it as strong a contender for ‘peer competitor’ status as China.142 How the dynamics of the United States-China-Japan relationship would

---

evolve was unclear, and the possibility of future conflict between the three powers could not be dismissed by Australian policy makers in this period.\textsuperscript{143}

Some Australian policy makers even began thinking of the Cold War period as ‘the good old days’, in which regional relations were far more predictable. The 1994 Defence White Paper argued that Australia’s region was now ‘benign but uncertain’, and hence more rather than less dangerous than during the Cold War, although no specific threat to Australia could be identified. Labor therefore remained attached to the traditional insurance policy of the ANZUS alliance, although there were also concerns over whether the United States would remain engaged in the region.\textsuperscript{144} Such concerns led to Australia’s participation in the first Gulf War in support of its great power ally.\textsuperscript{145} Moreover, Australia continued to maintain a military capacity far beyond the need for ‘continental defence’ advocated by the Dibb report.\textsuperscript{146}

Ultimately, ongoing concerns over strategic competition in the region meant that Australia’s interests could not be addressed wholly within a liberal multilateralist policy framework. The tensions between the different strands of Labor’s foreign policy were never fully resolved, and they became a major political issue under the new Howard government in 1996.

\textit{Labor’s ‘constructive commitment’ in the South Pacific}

Alongside ‘constructive engagement’ in Asia, Labor outlined its plans for ‘constructive commitment’ in the Southwest Pacific. Here, however, the decline of US power occasioned a shallower policy rethink, because Australia remained the dominant military and economic power. Hence ‘constructive commitment’ remained firmly within realist models of conflict between competing states, and was instituted to ward off increasing Japanese and Russian interest in the region.\textsuperscript{147} Although Evans

\textsuperscript{143} See Bell, ‘Political objectives,’ pp. 64-65.
\textsuperscript{145} On the mixed reaction in Asia to Australia’s participation in the Gulf War, see J Mohan Malik, \textit{The Gulf war: Australia’s role and Asian-Pacific responses}, Canberra, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 1992.
\textsuperscript{146} See Cheeseman, ‘Back to ‘Forward Defence’ and the Australian national style,’ pp. 251-268.
\textsuperscript{147} On strategic concerns in this period, see Graeme Cheeseman and Ian McAllister, ‘Popular and elite support in Australia for overseas military intervention,’ \textit{Australian Journal Of International Affairs} 48, no. 2 (1994), pp. 249-251; Firth, \textit{Australia in international politics: An introduction to Australian foreign policy}, pp. 46, 170-171; Richard Herr, ‘Australia and the Pacific Islands,’ in \textit{Australian foreign policy: Into the new millennium}, ed. F.A. Mediansky, South Melbourne, Macmillan Education
claimed that ‘Constructive commitment simply cannot involve any vestige of old
colonialism or new hegemony’, he also obliquely acknowledged the reality of
competition for influence in the region, writing:

The South Pacific is an area of primary strategic interest for us, in which we
have a clear interest in promoting peace and stability, including keeping the
region free from destabilising activity by any external power or group.148

Unlike the situation in Asia, Australian dominance in the South Pacific could be
backed up by the direct use or threat of military force. In 1987 Australia deployed
troops to Fiji during a military coup, with 120 soldiers landing to evacuate foreign
nationals. A more heavily armed intervention was called off as the political situation
stabilised. Likewise, contingency plans were drawn up for a military intervention in
Vanuatu after riots broke out in 1988. Military aid to regional governments was also
increased, in particular to counter the Bougainville secession movement. Bolt
described these developments as ‘a new militarism’, arguing

The heightened projection of military power is an attempt to maximize
Australian influence in the region… the maintenance and extension of
Australia’s economic and political power is the principal aim.149

The interventions were based on Defence Minister Kim Beazley’s concern that an
external power could penetrate the Southwest Pacific within 25 years, directly
contradicting the assessment of the Dibb report.150

With the end of the Cold War, Australia’s focus shifted to economic concerns,
heralded at the 1994 South Pacific Forum in the policy of ‘sustainable development’.
As with Labor’s domestic agenda, ‘sustainable development’ was based on neo-
liberal economic policies, with an emphasis on the private sector and the sustainable
commercial exploitation of natural resources such as timber and fish stocks.151
Implying that Pacific nations were to blame for their own problems, Minister for Pacific Island Affairs Bilney argued that

the policy frameworks adopted in the region have often retarded the prospects for long-term sustainable economic growth. Until appropriate national policies are implemented little improvement can be expected.152

The assumption underlying the policy was not only that economic development was necessary for political stability, but also that Australian intervention was necessary to restructure South Pacific societies before development could take place. Indeed,

The new approach involved an intended level of intervention in Pacific island societies and states not contemplated since the colonial period. The purpose was not only to transform the development model and to reform government procedures, but also to effect change in cultural structures and traditional practices, such as customary land tenure.153

Accordingly, Australia introduced macro-economic conditionality to its aid program, based on the principles of free trade, reduced government expenditure and a focus on private sector investment. Australia also supported the efforts of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), notably their intervention into PNG in 1995. Mirroring international trends, ‘good governance’ became another focus of Australia’s aid program in this period, with reform of government practices seen as a pre-condition for economic reform.154

---

At one level, the policy represented a sharp shift from strategic to economic concerns.\(^{155}\) It was hoped that Australia’s aid budget could be reduced, at a time when Australia’s own economic restructuring was proving painful.\(^{156}\) Moreover, Australia was intent that it should reap its share of any regional economic development, openly linking aid to increasing commercial opportunities.\(^{157}\) However, strategic concerns also remained important, with a perception developing that the end of the relatively predictable Cold War bipolarity had actually increased instability in the region.\(^{158}\) The Pacific was not actually considered a major area of economic opportunity; rather the problem was to explain its stagnation relative to Asia. At the same time, as obvious Cold War threats faded, internal problems were increasingly identified as the main challenges to Pacific stability.\(^{159}\) Poor governance and low government capacity, a lack of ‘law and order’ and weak economic development therefore became security issues in themselves.

5. Howard’s ‘hard-headed’ foreign policy

In March 1996, John Howard led the Liberal-National Coalition to a decisive federal election victory. Some accounts tend towards explaining Keating’s defeat purely in terms of foreign policy.\(^{160}\) However, Labor’s agenda in Asia was closely linked to its program of economic restructuring in general, which by 1996 was thoroughly unpopular. Howard’s pledge to make Australians ‘relaxed and comfortable’ related much more to domestic than foreign policy. Moreover, his approach to promoting Australia’s interests in the region included some strong continuities with previous

---


\(^{156}\) Herr, ‘Australia and the Pacific Islands,’ p. 243; Rosewarne, ‘Australia’s changing role in the South Pacific,’ pp. 98, 107, 111.

\(^{157}\) For example, Bilney, Poverty reduction, p. 11. See also Rosewarne, ‘Australia’s changing role in the South Pacific,’ p. 98.


governments’ policies. Nonetheless, the Howard government did partially define itself by its opposition to Labor’s approach to foreign affairs. This trend culminated in the East Timor intervention, an event which could hardly have been more incongruous with the policies of Keating and Evans. Examining the broad trends of Howard’s overall foreign policy, then, is useful for assessing the nature of the change of policy on East Timor.

Change and continuity in Howard’s foreign policy

From the outset, the Howard government seemed to offer a substantively different approach to foreign policy, as detailed in a Foreign Affairs and Trade White Paper, the first of its kind, in 1997. The paper contained a great deal of implicit criticism of Labor’s policy, stating from the outset that

Preparing for the future is not a matter of grand constructs. It is about the hard-headed pursuit of the interests which lie at the core of foreign and trade policy: the security of the Australian nation and the jobs and standard of living of the Australian people.

This suggested Evans’ focus on conceptual innovation, such as ‘middle power diplomacy’, had lost sight of the underlying goals of foreign policy. Most contentiously, the paper promised that ‘Australia does not need to choose between its history and its geography.’ Relations with Asia did not need to be promoted at the expense of traditional links to Australia’s Anglo-American friends. Moreover, although the paper pledged ongoing attention to multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and APEC, bilateral relations were now seen as ‘the basic building block [sic] for effective regional and global strategies.’ Accordingly, most effort would be directed to improving bilateral relations, and the importance of the US alliance was re-emphasised.

Just how substantial the realignment in Howard’s policy was, and how much rhetorical point scoring, has become a matter of debate. For Camilleri ‘the change of

---

162 In the national interest: Australia’s foreign and trade policy White Paper, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1997, p. iii.
163 Ibid., p. iv.
164 Ibid., p. iii, see also p. 53.
government represented a less radical break with the past than official rhetoric would suggest.\textsuperscript{165} Australia was still active in regional forums such as APEC and the ARF. In contrast, Dalrymple, while also affirming Howard’s continuing effort in regional forums in his first term, emphasises that the approach was based on what Howard termed ‘practical regionalism’, the pursuit of mutual interests rather than a sense that Australia ‘belonged’ in Asia in any cultural sense. Instead, Howard re-emphasised a personal attachment to the United Kingdom and America.\textsuperscript{166} Goldsworthy has also emphasised this shift, arguing that ‘continuity was not the whole story.’\textsuperscript{167} Howard had judged the pace of engagement with Asia as both unpractical and undesirable. An emphasis on ‘pragmatic bilateralism’ would provide a more secure foundation for foreign relations. This was a significant change from Labor’s approach, the depth of which was increasingly revealed in Howard’s second and third terms in office.

Howard’s increased emphasis on bilateral relations was most evident in trade policy. Australia did remain involved with multilateral negotiations through APEC and the WTO. At the same time, however, and particularly in its second term, the Howard government embarked on a series of bilateral negotiations, aimed at securing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with individual countries. Agreements were concluded with Thailand and Singapore by the end of 2003, and by the end of the Howard government discussions were underway with China, Japan, India, Malaysia and a conglomerate of Persian Gulf countries.\textsuperscript{168}

Most contentiously, negotiations on the Australia United States Free Trade Agreement (AUSTFA) were begun early in 2003, and were concluded in February 2004. The economic impact of the agreement is likely to be minimal, and both Capling and Grant have convincingly argued that its negotiation had more to do with political considerations than economic benefits. According to Capling, AUSTFA abandoned Labor’s sensible commitment to multilateral and regional trade regimes:

\textsuperscript{165} Camilleri, \textit{States, markets and civil society in Asia Pacific: the political economy of the Asia-Pacific region}, p. 308.
\textsuperscript{166} Dalrymple, \textit{Continental drift: Australia’s search for a regional identity}, p. 125.
The weak economics of the case suggested that Howard’s pursuit of the free trade agreement was being driven by other motives, including Australia’s desire to strengthen its political and strategic links with the United States.\textsuperscript{169}

As Grant argues, the public linkage of trade with the broader US relationship meant that any criticism of the AUSFTA was branded as ‘anti-American’, hampering debate on the intrinsic merits or otherwise of the trade agreement.\textsuperscript{170}

This emphasis on ties with the US was a central component of Howard’s foreign policy agenda. In 1994, Brown mused that

\begin{quote}
It may well be that the ANZUS Treaty, though never formally abrogated, will drift into the never-never land of nominally current but practically meaningless treaties.\textsuperscript{171}
\end{quote}

But in the 1996 election campaign, Howard promised to ‘reinvigorate’ the relationship with the United States, a promise which he more than fulfilled. The 1997 White Paper declared that ‘Australia’s alliance relationship with the United States is an asset both redefined and strengthened by the end of the Cold War,’ and that

\begin{quote}
A key objective of the Government will be to strengthen further the relationship between Australia and the United States by expanding the already close links that exist at the bilateral, regional and multilateral levels.\textsuperscript{172}
\end{quote}

Compare this to Labor’s somewhat downbeat assessment that while the alliance continues to be a key element of our defence policy… Our defence relationship will require careful management… we will need to work hard to make sure that the alliance continues to meet the needs of both parties.\textsuperscript{173}

The true depth of Howard’s turn to the US was only revealed, however, after the September 11\textsuperscript{th} 2001 terrorist attacks. Howard invoked the ANZUS treaty and pledged support for US retaliation, claiming the attacks were not only against the United States but ‘an attack upon the way of life we hold dear in common with the Americans.’\textsuperscript{174} This strong support continued during the US invasion of Iraq, despite

\begin{footnotes}
\item[169] Capling, All the way with the USA: Australia, the US and free trade, p. 53.
\item[170] Grant, Fatal attraction: Reflections on the alliance with the United States, p. 134.
\item[171] Brown, Australia’s security: issues for the new century, p. 214.
\item[172] In the national interest: Australia’s foreign and trade policy White Paper, p. 58.
\item[173] Defending Australia: Defence White Paper, pp. 95-96.
\end{footnotes}
the largest public opposition preceding any war in Australia’s history, and opposition from major powers such as France and Germany.\textsuperscript{175}

It is true that Labor also fully supported the Afghanistan deployment, and a Beazley or Latham government may well have been as supportive over Iraq, if faced with the pressures of actually controlling foreign affairs. Nonetheless, Howard confirmed the vital importance to Australia of the US alliance in spectacular fashion. The justification for the relationship was actually not different to that under Labor; United States engagement was crucial for stability in the region, and the alliance gave Australia certain functional benefits in military/strategic terms. What was different to the Labor years was the heightened and very public emphasis on the relationship’s importance.

This rhetoric went hand in hand with a more aggressive military posture. The 2000 White Paper explicitly affirmed a willingness to deploy Australia’s military forces outside of the continent and its immediate approaches.\textsuperscript{176} This was a distinct departure from the ‘strategy of denial’ which was at least partly implemented under Labor. Moreover, the White Paper highlighted the importance of developments in Northeast Asia, due to the centrality of Australia’s economic ties in this region, and the possibility that instability there could threaten Australia strategically. Thus, although not made fully public, the Australian military was prepared to take part in conflicts on the Korean Peninsular or in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{177}

Backing for the US alliance remained crucial to such a strategic stance, providing political and practical support for actions which inevitably draw a hostile reaction from other countries in the region. Seen through a classical realist framework,

As long as the potential use of force and relative force capabilities remain integral components of the Asia-Pacific security environment, Australia has a vital interest in maintaining a healthy politico-strategic relationship with the United States – the one power able to balance any foreseeable threat to Australia’s territorial integrity or critical maritime lifelines for the next ten to fifteen years.\textsuperscript{178}

\textsuperscript{175} See Camilleri, ‘A leap into the past - in the name of the ‘national interest’.’
\textsuperscript{178} Tow, ‘Introduction,’ p. 6.
After the East Timor deployment, Howard’s aggressive military posture reached qualitatively new heights, as discussed in Chapter Six, but the trend was present from the beginning of his government.

The decline of multilateral engagement

Driving Howard’s policy shift was a growing sense that Labor’s policy of engagement with Asia had not really paid off, and that ostensibly more robust and realistic relationships were needed for troubled times. Indeed, this feeling had begun under Labor itself, resulting in some shift towards bilateralism.\(^\text{179}\) Economically, APEC had proved a major disappointment, leaving ‘the centerpiece of Australia’s regional diplomatic effort in tatters.’\(^\text{180}\) The grouping brought together countries with vastly different levels and modes of economic development, and hence with very different political objectives. The non-binding, consensus based decision making structure prevented major ruptures, but was also incapable of providing a basis for meaningful negotiations. While the 1994 Bogor summit set targets for implementing free trade, these were scheduled far into the future, and no practical steps were agreed upon. By the 1995 Osaka summit the emphasis in the conference joint communiqué was on finding a formula acceptable to the multitude of members, but which masked the lack of genuine progress.\(^\text{181}\)

Strategically, tensions increased between the three great powers of the United States, Japan and China over the course of the 1990s, undermining many of the liberal assumptions of Evans’ policy of engagement. Multilateral forums including APEC and the ARF gave no indication that they would be capable of containing these tensions, which were fuelled not so much by actual conflict between the powers, as by the assumption by all parties that such conflict would be inevitable in the future.\(^\text{182}\) This was not simply a question of a China-USA confrontation, although that was the focus of public attention. The situation was complicated by the US relationship with Japan, which, although publicly cordial, contained an underlying

\(^{180}\) Beeson, ‘American hegemony: The view from Australia,’ p. 121.
\(^{182}\) For a discussion of the various views of regional powers on the potential for China-USA-Japan conflict, see Aileen San Pablo-Baviera, ‘The China factor in US alliances in East Asia and the Asia Pacific,’ 57, no. 2 (2003).
tension and was characterised by mutual distrust. In both the US and Australia, treaty
relations with Japan continued to be seen as a preventive measure against Japanese as
much as Chinese aggression.  

The potential for conflict between the three powers, in whatever configuration, poses
a particular problem for Australia, which has substantial economic, political and
strategic ties with the USA and Japan, and rapidly expanding economic ties with
China. The latter had become particularly important during the 1990s, as China
finally began to fulfill its long heralded economic potential. China’s share of
Australia’s exports increased from 2.6% in 1990-91 to 5.7 in 2000-01. Moreover,
the rate of absolute increase of trade with China was easily the highest of Australia’s
major trading partners in the 1990s, reaching an average of 15.3% between 1990-91
and 2000-01.

Initially, this growing importance was not reflected in Howard’s foreign policy.
Along with the reinvigorated US alliance, he moved to strengthen Australia’s
relationship with Japan, casting the two countries as the northern and southern
‘anchors’ keeping the US engaged in the region. At the beginning of Howard’s first
term, the strengthened alliance relationships were coupled with an aggressive posture
towards China over issues such as Taiwan and human rights. Predictably, this
drew a hostile reaction from China, which saw the Japan-Australia ‘anchors’ more as
American ‘pincers’, containing its regional ambitions. In response, the Howard
government followed a more conciliatory line towards China from early 1997,
rhetorically emphasising ‘engagement’ rather than ‘containment’. Somewhat
paradoxically, this included attempts to draw China into multilateral bodies such as
APEC and the WTO, as a way of integrating China into existing frameworks of

---

184 See Table 1.1. China’s share of Australia’s trade spiked to 5.5% in 1960-63, but then dropped off
to 1.4% in 1970-71. It then grew to reach 5.7% in 1990-91, and continued to expand thereafter.
185 Edwards and Goldsworthy, eds., Facing North: A century of Australian engagement with Asia:
186 Stuart Harris, Will China divide Australia and the US? Sydney, Australian Centre for American
and China: Divergence and convergence of interests,’ in The national interest in a global era:
University Press, 2001, pp. 112-116; Craig Snyder, ‘Australia’s regional security environment,’ in
99-105.
international relations. Conceptually, this was underpinned by the description of China as ‘one of Australia’s key relationships’ in the 1997 White Paper, while removing references to China as a competitor or threat to the USA. Nonetheless, the fundamental contradiction between economic and strategic-political interests remained. As Malik argues,

The contradictory and ambiguous stance of the Coalition government to China’s resurgence became clear as Canberra tried both to conciliate China, stressing that it posed no threat, and to use the changing balance of power in East Asia to justify both new defence spending and a forward defence posture.

Australia’s dilemma was highlighted in 2004-05 when the government maintained a studied ambiguity about its potential response to conflict over Taiwan, which could hardly have satisfied either of the great powers.

The 1997 Asian economic crisis

The shift in foreign policy priorities under Howard was punctuated by the spectacularly disastrous economic crisis which afflicted South Korea and Southeast Asia in particular from July 1997. The values of stock exchanges and local currencies plummeted across the region (see Table 3.2). Between 1997 and 1998, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell by 10.5% in Thailand, 7.4% in Malaysia and 6.9% in South Korea. Indonesia was especially hard hit. The value of its stock exchange fell 17% in the six months to September 1997, and GDP fell by 13.1% between 1997 and 1998. Unemployment doubled between 1997 and 1999, while inflation soared, resulting in widespread rioting in early 1998.

---

187 Camilleri, States, markets and civil society in Asia Pacific: the political economy of the Asia-Pacific region, p. 318.
188 In the national interest: Australia’s foreign and trade policy White Paper, pp. 63-64.
The crisis prompted a reversal in thinking about the role of so-called ‘Asian values’, which had been widely held as vital in the economic success of the newly industrialising countries in East Asia. The rhetoric of Asian values, which supposedly stress elements such as subordination of the individual to social goals and hierarchical leadership based on a familial model, had appealed to conservative politicians both in Australia and in some Asian countries, notably Malaysia and Singapore. In particular, they were held up as a reason why Australia could not truly belong in Asia due to cultural differences, and also, ironically, as a model for economic success which Australia should seek to follow.192

But in the turmoil of Asia’s economic collapse, Australia seemed a beacon of stability and strong growth, and played a widely publicised role in the program of economic assistance to its beleaguered neighbours, which was coordinated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Australia’s economic success was now said to be based precisely on what was different about its economic path compared to its Asian neighbours, and it was Australia’s turn to be seen as a model for Asian nations to emulate, rather than the converse. This added to Howard’s vision of Australia as a confident player in the region, but one that no longer had to be apologetic for its cultural differences.193 This recasting of Australian nationalism was further boosted by the East Timor intervention, as discussed in Chapter Six.

The crisis also added to the uncertainty that seemed to characterise post-Cold War Asia, as economic problems forced political changes. Indonesia was the most profoundly affected country. The much-heralded economic progress of decades came crashing down in a matter of months, taking with it the Suharto regime. Australia’s policy towards Indonesia was left in tatters, with chaos replacing the all important ‘stability’ which had justified support for the dictatorship. Worse, the crisis eventually resulted in the separation of East Timor from Indonesia, an outcome Australia had resolutely opposed for two decades. In 1999 the previously unthinkable became policy, as Australia launched a military operation to secure East Timor’s independence. The following chapters examine the development of Australia’s


policy towards Indonesia and East Timor from 1949, before turning to the specific question of Australia’s troop deployment to East Timor in 1999.
Chapter Two

Australia, Indonesia and East Timor, 1945-1996

One of the most fraught areas of Australia’s post-World War Two foreign policy has been the bilateral relationship with Indonesia. Never-ending concern over bilateral crises, both real and imagined, eventually prompted a somewhat exasperated Foreign Minister Gareth Evans to declare the need for ‘an approach focused not on constantly self-consciously taking the temperature of the relationship, but rather getting on with the task of building it…’\(^1\) A few years later, however, the bilateral relationship would again reach crisis point over the transition to independence in East Timor. This chapter examines Australia’s relations with Indonesia between 1945 and 1974, before turning to Australia’s response to Indonesia’s invasion of East Timor. In the chapter’s final section, it is argued that Australia’s policy towards the Indonesian archipelago has consistently been driven by a concern to prevent its imperialist rivals from gaining a strategic toehold in its northern approaches. This is central to the thesis’s overall argument, which holds that the 1999 intervention can be best explained as a continuation of this longstanding policy.

1. Indonesian-Australian relations, 1945-1974

Before World War Two, there was minimal contact between Australia and the then Netherlands East Indies (NEI). The economic ties of both territories were largely with their respective imperial systems. Britain and the Netherlands were on friendly terms, abating security fears. This comfortable indifference was shattered by the Japanese invasion of the NEI in 1941, and the post-war declaration of independence

by the Republic of Indonesia. What follows is not intended to be a comprehensive account of Indonesian-Australian relations over the next 30 years, but focuses on several key episodes which reveal Australia’s main concerns. Particular attention is paid to Indonesia’s emergence as an independent nation, the crucial moment in the formation of Australian attitudes.

**Australia’s response to Indonesia’s independence**

On August 17th 1945, under the leadership of President Sukarno, the Republic of Indonesia declared unilateral independence from the Netherlands. The Republic was the culmination of a decades old nationalist movement, and in the following years of war it was sustained by deep popular support in Java and Sumatra in particular. Indonesia’s nationalists had given a bold lead to the anti-colonial movement which would transform Asia over the next few decades. But despite having supposedly fought to ‘liberate’ Asia from Japanese imperialism, the Allies refused to recognise the Republic. The Netherlands attempted to re-impose its sovereignty, only withdrawing from Indonesia in 1949, and then only because Republican forces had fought out a military stalemate. Britain, whose forces occupied the NEI in order to accept the Japanese surrender, gave crucial support to the Netherlands. While refusing to directly confront the Republic, the British military administration facilitated the return of the Netherlands’ own armed forces and civilian administration. The United States’ position was more ambiguous, only coming to support the Republic after several years of diplomatic and military conflict.

In comparison, Australia’s response to the Republic was far more positive and constructive. In particular, Canberra provided support for the Republic’s diplomatic efforts, the value of which was acknowledged by its leaders. Australian support for

---


Indonesian independence was, however, neither immediate nor unqualified. The issue polarized domestic political opinion. On the far Left, the Republic found an important ally in the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and the trade unions where it had influence, in particular the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF). The WWF supported the mutinies and strikes of Indonesian sailors located in Australia, which crippled Dutch military and civil shipping. The union then imposed its own industrial bans on the Dutch merchant fleet, lasting on and off until 1949. Over this time, the ban affected over 500 ships, which denied the Dutch important administrative and military supplies, delaying the reestablishment of the exiled NEI administration and allowing the Republic to develop its rival administration, and firm up its support base.

But the political Right, led by Menzies, denounced the Republic as nothing more than a product of the Japanese occupation. They supported the full restoration of the Netherlands’ sovereignty, not least on grounds of racial solidarity. Along with most newspapers, Menzies denounced the industrial campaign as a Communist plot to take control over Australian foreign policy, and demanded the government take firm action to bring it to an end.

The Chifley Labor government refused to take such action. Chifley gave the NEI administration the excuse that he feared triggering widespread industrial action, which could not be afforded during post-war reconstruction. No doubt there was some truth to this. But at the same time, Chifley began to build links with Republican leaders, to whom he presented the shipping ban as evidence of Australia’s sympathy. He thus used the industrial campaign as a diplomatic cover for his policy of increasing support for Indonesian independence.

These diplomatic maneuvers reflected Australia’s ambiguous attitude towards Indonesian independence. Formally, Canberra supported the restoration of the NEI, only recognising the Republic after the Dutch granted independence in 1949. Australia also sold surplus military equipment to the Netherlands. At the same time

---

6 A full account can be found in Rupert Lockwood, *Black armada: Australia and the struggle for Indonesian independence, 1942-49*, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1982.
7 Ibid., p. 4.
though, the government realised that a simple return to the pre-war status quo in the NEI was impossible. Australia’s interests lay in achieving a peaceful, orderly transition of power. An early assessment by the Department of External Affairs (DEA), argued that

only fairly drastic remedies applied now will have any hope of successfully resolving the situation by meeting the legitimate demands of the native peoples whilst at the same time preserving some order and stability by permitting the return of the previous administration… the vital security interests of Australia [lie] in fostering a liberal settlement…

By the end of 1945 Australia had come to support a negotiated settlement, in which Indonesia was given national autonomy, but not immediate or full independence.

The Dutch, however, remained intransigent. As early as December 1945 one Australian official in the NEI warned that the ‘…Dutch remedy is force, and still more force, to teach the ‘natives’ a lesson’, and that ‘the real problem is not whether the Indonesians can govern themselves but whether they will allow the Dutch to govern them.’ With negotiations deadlocked, the Dutch resorted to military actions in July 1947 and December 1948. But rather than eradicating Republican resistance, they entrenched the very instability Australia feared. As a result, the Australian government shifted policy, actively aiding the independence movement from mid-1947 at the latest. Australia, along with India, raised the issue of the first Dutch military action in the United Nations (UN) Security Council. From then on, Australia increasingly acted as the Republic’s diplomatic proxy in UN sponsored negotiations.

---

14. For details, see George, Australia and the Indonesian Revolution, pp. 96-155.
However, while ultimately successful, Australia’s policy was not as ‘swift and percipient’ as sometimes assumed, with Australia constantly reacting to the rapidly changing situation in the NEI. The sheer force of the anti-colonial movement in Asia following World War Two was not foreseen, and Evatt in particular stressed the need for a lengthy period of tutelage for the colonised nations, in order that they might absorb ‘Western’ values before independence. Moreover, far from being based on a principled anti-colonial stand, Australia’s policy was designed to secure its own imperialist interests in the region. The resulting tensions in Australia’s position are well drawn out by George, who argues that the Labor government’s anti-colonialism was primarily one of opposition to colonial monopolization by the metropolitan [sic] powers, rather than support for the nationalist claimants. It was also an assertion of Australia’s interests and power.

Australia’s interests in the NEI were partly economic. Faced with the decline of the British imperial trade network, Australia was anxious to secure new markets and sources of raw materials. Evatt argued in somewhat muted terms in Parliament in September 1942, that ‘our post-war order in the Pacific cannot be for the sole benefit of one power or group of powers.’ More bluntly, the Australian government in 1943 demanded of United Kingdom Deputy Prime Minister Atlee that the trustee system apply to non-self governing territories in the Asia-Pacific after the war, and that ‘Exclusive economic rights in colonial territories [must] be abandoned and ready access to their markets and raw materials [must] be open to all countries.’

More important in the long term were Australia’s strategic concerns. From an early stage, Australia’s thinking on Indonesian independence was marked by a fear that a power vacuum in Indonesia would allow a hostile country, such as Russia, to repeat

---

16 Catley and Dugis, Australian Indonesian relations, p. 18; George, Australia and the Indonesian Revolution, pp. 52-53, 101, 157.
17 George, Australia and the Indonesian Revolution, p. 156. See also Catley and Dugis, Australian Indonesian relations, p. 19.
Japan’s rapid advances through Southeast Asia during World War Two. Against Britain’s objection that the Dutch must not be criticised in the UN for fear of involving Russia, the Secretary of the DEA argued that it was precisely by doing nothing to support the Indonesian nationalists that the Western powers would open the door to Russian interference.

The fear of Communist involvement also prompted Australia to intervene in the internal politics of the Indonesian Republic, throwing its weight behind moderate leaders in order to prevent the rise of more radical elements, especially the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). One diplomat revealed the limits of Australian ‘anti-colonialism’ by complaining that

“The Dutch clearly do not understand… what is likely to happen in the long run – the triumph of extremist forces in Indonesia with attendant dangers to all white races in the area.”

The need for ‘stability’ in Indonesia flowed from a perception that both hostile great powers and local radicals would benefit from political unrest in the region.

But while the fear of instability resulted in pragmatic support for Indonesian independence, it did not lead to a consistent anti-colonial policy. On the contrary, Australia sought to strengthen its own position as a colonial power in the post-war

---


period. First and foremost, this meant reaffirming control over Papua New Guinea (PNG). Australia’s support for the trusteeship system was designed to limit UN and United States pressure on Australian territorial interests, by advocating a ‘positive colonialism’. Evatt rejected the idea that our jurisdiction might be in the slightest degree lessened from that exercised under the Mandate. On the contrary, our jurisdiction in certain respects extended and strengthened [sic].

Second, Australia envisaged an increase in the territory under its control. Evatt in particular had grand wartime plans for Australia adopting a far more prominent role as a regional power. In 1944 he proposed that Australia assume full or partial ‘responsibility for policing’ in New Guinea, Portuguese (East) Timor, the British Solomons, Dutch New Guinea (West Papua), Dutch Timor, the ‘southern fringe of East Indies [sic] up to and including Java’ and the New Hebrides (Vanuatu). More concretely, in 1943 Evatt proposed that following the war Australia should lease the particularly strategic territories of Dutch New Guinea and Dutch Timor. In 1946 he again raised the idea that Australia should take control of Dutch Timor in exchange for canceling the NEI’s war debts to Australia, but this was rejected by the Netherlands.

Evatt’s ambitions eventually came to little. For example, his initial suggestion that Australian troops should play a major role in reoccupying the NEI was vetoed by Chifley as logistically and politically impossible. However, such designs again

---

24 The pre-war territories of Papua and New Guinea were united under a single Australian administration in 1945. Australia also resumed control of Nauru.
28 George, Australia and the Indonesian Revolution, pp. 15-19.
29 Ibid., p. 74.
reveal Australia’s concern that a rapid Dutch withdrawal from the NEI could be destabilising.31

**Australia’s embarrassment over West Papua**

Australia’s underlying distrust of rapid decolonisation soon soured relations with independent Indonesia. The Sukarno government began to act against conditions the Netherlands had imposed during independence negotiations, most importantly the continued Dutch sovereignty over West Papua.32 Sukarno argued that by definition Indonesian independence would be incomplete without the ‘liberation’ of this territory.33 Negotiations proved fruitless, and in 1960 the Netherlands announced that West Papua would eventually become an independent state. Indonesia responded with a military buildup and a series of incursions into West Papua, backed by the threat of outright invasion. Lacking international support, the Netherlands handed formal control to the UN in August 1962. But the UN sponsored act of self-determination was farcical, because Indonesia already had a substantial presence in the territory. The province of ‘Irian Jaya’ was formally incorporated into Indonesia in May 1963.

Despite backing Indonesian independence, the Labor government had continued to support the Netherlands’ sovereignty over West Papua.34 In the 1940s, West Papuans were seen by Australia as ethnically or racially different to other ‘Indonesians’, and politically less mature, although this objection could just as well apply to many other areas which had become part of Indonesia. A more important consideration was that West Papua shared a land border with PNG, which was regarded as a vital territory for the defence of Australia. The Dutch were considered more trustworthy partners in the defence of the island than the new ‘Asiatic’ Indonesian state, which might even pose a threat to Australia’s colony.35

---

32 The territory is and was known by a variety of names, but West Papua has come to be the most commonly accepted in Australia.
33 For a brief account of the dispute, see Catley and Dugis, *Australian Indonesian relations*, pp. 20-24.
34 George, *Australia and the Indonesian Revolution*, pp. 144-149.
These security concerns remained at the heart of Menzies’ policy. His longstanding support for Dutch colonialism as a bulwark against Asian powers was only reinforced by hardening Cold War attitudes in Australia, and by the growth in influence of the PKI in Indonesia.\(^{36}\) As Catley and Dugis write,

> The Australian government was obsessed with the idea that the existence of [sic] ‘aggressive, united or monolithic force’ would cause another World War, and it saw a politically unstable Indonesia, at the mercy of communist interests, as a potential threat to the security of East New Guinea and Australia itself.\(^{37}\)

Accordingly, from 1950 until 1962, Australia openly opposed Indonesia’s ambitions in West Papua, and attempted to muster support for the Netherlands in the UN. Throughout the 1950s Australia and the Netherlands discussed coordinating their administrations, and Australia sought involvement in development and defence of the western half of the island.\(^{38}\)

However, the United States opposed these efforts. Washington calculated that while the Netherlands and Australia might be disgruntled with a lack of support from their superpower, they would certainly not break their alliances. On the other hand, failure to support Indonesia over West Papua might well destroy a key strategic relationship by driving Sukarno into the hands of the Russians.\(^{39}\) Without support from the United States, Australia was forced into an embarrassing back down, with nothing to show for its decade long support of the Netherlands. This reversal began in 1959, when Australia stated that it would recognise any peaceful settlement between Indonesia and the Netherlands, although this was unlikely. In January 1962 Barwick, the new Minister for External Affairs, completed the policy reversal, publicly

---


\(^{37}\) Catley and Dugis, *Australian Indonesian relations*, p. 21.


declaring that Indonesian incorporation of West Papua would not be harmful to Australia’s interests.

Apart from a realistic assessment of Australia’s impotence, Barwick had concluded that the real threat to security lay in needlessly angering Indonesia, and possibly encouraging its links to Communist China.\(^{40}\) As such, it marked a return to Chifley’s concern for the effects of Australian policy on Indonesian domestic politics. But damage had already been done to the relationship, although Australia had sought to quarantine the West Papua issue from wider relations.\(^{41}\)

**The neighbours come to blows: konfrontasi**

The failures over West Papua resulted in a much more cautious policy regarding Indonesia’s campaign against the creation of Malaysia. In 1961, plans to create a new state from the British controlled territories of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei (the last three in northern Borneo) were announced. Malaysia came into being in September 1963, although Brunei did not in the event join, and Singapore split away again in 1965. Indonesia opposed the creation of Malaysia as a sham decolonisation, aimed at preserving British interests in the region. Sukarno might also have been considering absorbing the Borneo territories into Indonesia, although Canberra thought this unlikely.\(^{42}\) In any case, from 1963 Indonesia launched a campaign known as *konfrontasi*, consisting of guerilla operations in north Borneo and the Malayan peninsular, designed to put pressure on the fragile Malaysian state.\(^{43}\) The policy was not finally abandoned until 1966, after Sukarno’s fall from power.

These developments created a serious dilemma for Australia. On the one hand, Australia’s Cold War strategy was based on ‘forward defence’, which aimed to defeat Communism in Southeast Asia, far from Australian shores, in joint action with major power allies. Britain’s continued power in the region was vital to this strategy, and Malaya was seen as a crucial bulwark against the spread of Communism. Australia therefore had substantial forces permanently stationed in Malaya, and had

---

\(^{40}\) Catley and Dugis, *Australian Indonesian relations*, pp. 24-27. See also Pemberton, *All the way*, pp. 101-104.

\(^{41}\) See Renouf, *The frightened country*, pp. 405, 425.


\(^{43}\) For an account, see Catley and Dugis, *Australian Indonesian relations*, pp. 50-60, 120-124.
been involved in counter-insurgency operations there from the late 1940s. De-colonisation needed to be completed in the region without harming Australian and British interests. As such, Barwick noted that ‘…Malaysia probably represents the best solution any one has so far produced but it is a far from perfect one.’

But at the same time, Australia did not want to clash with Indonesia over Malaysia, especially since Barwick was still trying to repair the bilateral damage sustained over West Papua. Friendship with Indonesia and Australia’s wider strategic interests were both important, but ‘it became increasingly more difficult for Barwick to keep these two contradictory objectives in balance.’ At first, it seemed as if the dilemma could be solved. Australia gave early support for the Malaysian project, but this support was more qualified than Britain’s. Casting itself as mediator, Australia called for careful implementation of the project, including recognition of Indonesia’s genuine security concerns. This strategy was rewarded with the signing of the ‘Manila accords’ in June 1963, in which Indonesia accepted the creation of Malaysia, provided the UN supervise a process to ascertain the support of the Borneo peoples.

But negotiations soon broke down over the implementation of the agreement. Following Malaysia’s establishment in September 1963, Indonesia escalated its military action, and Australia was forced to take a more open position in support of its allies. This did not mean, though, an immediate commitment to the outright military defence of Malaysia, but rather a policy of ‘graduated response’. Initially, Australia provided increased military aid and training to the Malaysian military. Naval and air support for Malaysian operations followed, and in June 1964 Australian engineers were deployed in Sabah. Finally, in early 1965, Australian

---

44 The so-called ‘Malayan emergency’.
47 Also, to a lesser extent, those of the Philippines, which claimed a territorial interest in north Borneo. See ‘Document 26, Cabinet decision no. 632, 5 February 1963,’ in Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the formation of Malaysia, 1961-1966, ed. Moreen Dee, Canberra, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2005; ‘Document 42, Submission no. 575 from Barwick to Cabinet, 26 February 1963,’ in Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the formation of Malaysia, 1961-1966, ed. Moreen Dee, Canberra, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2005.
48 Catley and Dugis, Australian Indonesian relations, pp. 62-63.
combat troops were sent to north Borneo. There were a number of direct clashes between Indonesian and Australian forces.

The policy of graduated response aimed at demonstrating Australia’s support for Malaysia, while not cutting off all friendly relations with Indonesia, as well as ‘retaining some scope for exercising a deterrent role in Indonesia.’ This latter rested largely on the vague threat of the United States becoming involved in the dispute through the ANZUS treaty. Following the West Papua episode, Australia was wary of fully committing to Malaysia’s defence without United States’ support. But Washington was reluctant to become involved, and stated that ANZUS would only apply in the event of open conflict between Australia and Indonesia in Borneo, not the guerilla operations to which Indonesia was limiting itself.

Given that Australian and Indonesian troops were actually fighting one another, albeit unofficially, it is remarkable that bilateral relations did not deteriorate more than they did. Both countries wanted to quarantine the Malaysian issue from their wider relationship. Sukarno never subjected Australia to the same level of anti-imperialist rhetoric as he did Britain, and while he encouraged nationalist demonstrators to destroy the British and Malaysian embassies in 1963, security was maintained at the Australian embassy. Australia’s earlier policy of mediation may have paid off in this respect, with Sukarno unwilling to break off this avenue for a future diplomatic solution. Nonetheless, if Indonesia had persisted with konfrontasi, the bilateral ramifications would have been serious. Australia was saved from further complications by the fall of Sukarno.

The rise of Suharto’s ‘New Order’

Underlying the konfrontasi dispute were Australian fears of Communist penetration of maritime Southeast Asia. It was not only that the defence of Malaysia was considered vital to contain Communist China. There was also increasing concern that

---

49 Ibid., pp. 107-117, 131-134.
50 ‘Document 138, Barwick to Harrison, 16 December 1963,’ in Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the formation of Malaysia, 1961-1966, ed. Moreen Dee, Canberra, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2005, p. 201. See also Adil, Australia’s policy towards Indonesia during Confrontation, 1962-66, pp. 54-55; Catley and Dugis, Australian Indonesian relations, pp. 82-86.
51 Lee, ‘The origins,’ pp. 88-93; Pemberton, All the way, pp. 169-191.
52 Adil, Australia’s policy towards Indonesia during Confrontation, 1962-66, p. 29; Catley and Dugis, Australian Indonesian relations, p. 131.
Sukarno was drifting into the Communist orbit. Konfrontasi only served to heighten perceptions on both sides that Australia and Indonesia were members of opposing blocs in the region. Domestically, Sukarno’s anti-imperialist rhetoric strengthened the PKI. Internationally, Indonesia’s antagonistic stance led to strains in relations with the United States, and made International Monetary Fund (IMF) intervention to stabilise the economy politically impossible.

In 1963 Menzies announced a new defence plan which envisaged Indonesia as a direct threat to Australia. The purchase of long-range F-111 aircraft that year was clearly aimed at Indonesia, and would have been used in retaliatory strikes if Indonesia launched outright war on Malaysia or Singapore. There had already been covert military action against Indonesia. In the early months of 1958 the United States intervened to support the ‘Permesta’ regional rebellion against the Indonesian government, using Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) pilots to supply the rebels, and even to fly combat missions against Indonesian forces. Australia provided logistical support for these operations. But Sukarno easily defeated the rebels, and Western support merely gave credence to the PKI’s anti-imperialist rhetoric. Increasingly, therefore, the Western powers looked to the Indonesian military to curb Sukarno’s drift to the Left.

It was a lesser known general, Suharto, who came to the rescue. On September 30th, 1965, a group of low ranking military personnel kidnapped and murdered six senior generals. These actions were denounced by the army as an attempted PKI coup against the Sukarno government. Under Suharto’s leadership, they launched their own ‘counter-coup’, rapidly seizing control of Jakarta and then routing PKI resistance throughout the country. It is estimated that between 300,000 and 500,000 people were killed, either because they were PKI members or sympathizers, or due to local disputes which could now be settled with impunity. The CIA described it as

---

56 Pemberton, *All the way*, p. 76.
57 Humphrey McQueen, *Japan to the rescue*, Port Melbourne, William Heinemann, 1991, p. 69.
58 Chauvel, ‘Up the creek without a paddle,’ pp. 64-67; Pemberton, *All the way*, p. 77.
59 A figure of 300,000-400,000 is given in Damien Kingsbury, *The politics of Indonesia*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 57. An often cited figure of 500,000 is given in McQueen, *Japan to the rescue*, p. 75.
‘one of the worst mass murders of the twentieth century...’ Sukarno was gradually eased from power, and died under virtual house arrest in 1970. Suharto would rule Indonesia until 1998.

The precise nature and aims of the first ‘coup’ remain unknown, and possibly always will. The officers involved did have links to the PKI, and they were probably acting in the belief that the senior generals were themselves plotting to overthrow Sukarno. Crucially though, the PKI as a whole seems to have been completely unprepared to seize power. It is also possible that Suharto himself had some involvement in the kidnapping.

These details were of no concern to Australian policy makers. Suharto’s rise was greeted with unconcealed relief. Although it was not immediately clear that Suharto would succeed in crushing the PKI, it was earnestly hoped that he would. Australia did what it could to help, with Radio Australia instructed to broadcast only information which would be approved of by the army, and to attempt to discredit the PKI. The CIA gave more direct assistance, providing details of top PKI cadre to be eliminated. Eventually, it became apparent that Indonesian politics had been completely redefined. While konfrontasi was only abandoned in August 1966, given the anti-Communist ideology of his regime Suharto was a natural Cold War ally for the West. In July 1966 a gleeful Prime Minister Holt declared that ‘with 500,000 to 1,000,000 Communist sympathizers knocked off, I think it is safe to assume a reorientation has taken place.’ The support for Suharto was bi-partisan. The same month that he became Labor Party leader in 1967, Whitlam wrote in the press that

The new Government of Indonesia is well disposed towards this country. It is our obligation and in our interest to see that we render all the political, diplomatic and economic support we can. If the coup of 18 months ago... had

60 Cited in Kingsbury, The politics of Indonesia, p. 63.
61 For a critical account, see Ibid., pp. 57-63.
62 See, for example, Political savingram no. 52 from Australian Embassy Jakarta,’ 15.11.1965/19.11.1965, Department of External Affairs, National Archives of Australia no. A6364, JA1965/01S; Political savingram no. 59 from Australian Embassy Jakarta,’ 25.11.1965/29.11.1965, Department of External Affairs, National Archives of Australia no. A6364, JA1965/01S.
64 McQueen, Japan to the rescue, p. 75.
succeeded… we would have had a country of 100 million dominated by communists on our border.  

Leading academic observers of Indonesia also stressed the benefits of Suharto’s regime.  

Keen to support Suharto and enhance the bilateral relationship, Australia was providing tens of millions of dollars in bilateral financial aid by the mid 1970s, as well as military aid and training.

Praise for Suharto continued long after the supposed Communist threat had faded. In 1997 Whitlam still stood by his 1991 declaration, made shortly after the Santa Cruz massacre, that ‘President Suharto is a reasonable and an honorable man.’

Former Prime Minister Keating reiterated the Cold War justification in 2000, writing that ‘The coming to power of the New Order government was arguably the event of single greatest strategic benefit to Australia after the Second World War.’

This enthusiasm for Suharto has systematically ignored the human slaughter on which his regime was based. Even where it is acknowledged, Australia’s involvement is often played down. For example, a recent account remarks that there was ‘A lack of concern at the means by which Suharto gained control in Indonesia…’ and that ‘Holt’s reaction reflected the contemporary privileging of strategic priorities over human rights in Australian foreign policy.’ This is correct insofar as it goes, but it implies merely an indifference to Suharto’s crimes. In reality, Australia approved of the regime’s brutality, because it was recognised that this was an intrinsic part of restoring political and economic stability. Holt was at least honest in his praise for this reality, as was the Australian embassy in Jakarta, which saw the Indonesian army as ‘refreshingly determined to do over the P.K.I.’ Elsewhere the

---

68 Catley and Dugis, *Australian Indonesian relations*, pp. 149-154.
71 See Burchill, ‘Absolving the dictator.’; McQueen, *Japan to the rescue*, p. 75.
72 Goldsworthy, et al., ‘Reorientation.’
events were described as a ‘cleansing operation’, with the number of people killed and imprisoned inestimable, but which ‘cannot be small’. As McQueen argues,

…Australians should appreciate that our post-1965 sense of ease in regard to Indonesia has been built on the bones of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians murdered in late 1965 under the direction of our ally and for our mutual security.

2. Australia and the Indonesian invasion of East Timor

The relative simplification in Australian-Indonesian relations brought by Suharto’s rise was short-lived. In 1974, Portugal began a process of decolonisation in its territory of East Timor, but this was derailed by Indonesia’s invasion of the half-island. Persistent resistance to Indonesia’s occupation, both in East Timor itself and in Australia, introduced a new source of tension in the relationship, which was only removed in 1999.

**Australia and East Timor to 1974**

As with Indonesia, Australia paid only sporadic attention to Portuguese (East) Timor before World War Two. Despite its proximity, there was no major Australian commercial activity there. Oil concessions secured by Australian firms were left idle for years before being sold to major international companies. Strategic concerns were more important. Like the Netherlands, Portugal was a British ally, but not, in Australia’s opinion, a reliable one. Although Britain was unconcerned, Australia feared that Portugal was not strong enough to defend the territory, or would perhaps sell it to another power, such as Russia, Germany or France. Following World War One, attention shifted to Japanese interests in the territory. Operating under the cover of commercial concerns, by the late 1930s the Japanese government was buying Portuguese Timor’s entire agricultural surplus, had established a regular air link, and was pushing for involvement in the oil industry. Australia responded by establishing

---

74 Political savingram no. 53 from Australian Embassy Jakarta,’ 22.11.1965/26.11.1965, Department of External Affairs, National Archives of Australia no. A6364, JA1965/01S.

75 McQueen, *Japan to the rescue*, p. 76.


its own commercial air link, which provided cover for a military intelligence officer stationed in the capital Dili.\(^78\)

Japan’s rapid advance through Southeast Asia in late 1941 made the defence of the entire island of Timor a vital concern. From December 13\(^{th}\), Australian troops were stationed in Dutch (West) Timor to help with the defence of Kupang, an important port which could be used to threaten Australia’s northwest coast. But Australia assumed Japan would also invade Portuguese Timor, despite it being a neutral territory. Accordingly, on December 17\(^{th}\), Australian and Dutch troops took control of the eastern half of the island, the objections of the Portuguese governor notwithstanding.\(^79\) Nonetheless, Japan easily captured the territory in February 1942.

However, Australian forces continued guerilla resistance in the mountainous countryside until they were eventually withdrawn in January 1943.\(^80\) They inflicted disproportionate casualties on the Japanese, who were forced to station around 20,000 soldiers in the territory. This success depended on substantial assistance from the local Timorese, who furnished supplies and acted as guides and bearers. The Japanese razed whole villages in acts of collective punishment. Thousands of civilians died from starvation and disease, and others fell victim to Allied air raids. It is estimated that around 40,000 East Timorese died, out of a population of less than 500,000.\(^81\)

It is often argued that Australia owes a ‘debt’ to the East Timorese for the aid they gave Australian troops during the war. This focus has obscured some details about the conflict, painting an overly rosy picture of Australian soldiers’ relationship with their ‘native’ helpers.\(^82\) First, it is not the case that all Timorese supported the

---


\(^{80}\) A full account is given in Christopher Wray, *Timor 1942: Australian commandos at war with the Japanese*, Hawthorn, Hutchison Australia, 1987.


Australians, and support for the Japanese increased as they consolidated their hold on the territory.  

Second, and more importantly, while the terrible casualties suffered by the Timorese are often noted, it is rarely mentioned that Japan only decided to invade after Australian troops occupied the neutral territory, and even then only after lengthy debate. The military argued that it was necessary to invade in order to deny Australia a base of operations. But they had to overcome opposition from the Foreign Ministry, Prime Minister Tojo and Emperor Hirohito, who were concerned about the diplomatic consequences of violating Portuguese neutrality. There was further debate as to whether Japanese forces should be withdrawn from Portuguese territory once the Allies were expelled, or whether the territory should be retained as a naval base. It is worth noting that Japan never invaded Portuguese Macau, and East Timor never attained significance as a base for Japanese operations in the area, which were conducted from Kupang. The Australian and Japanese governments must share equal culpability for dragging the East Timorese into World War Two, a conflict which was not their own, and from which they could not possibly benefit.

Nonetheless, in Australian minds East Timor’s strategic importance was confirmed, and there were some abortive attempts to permanently draw the territory into Australia’s security orbit as part of the post-war settlement. In 1943, Evatt included East Timor in the list of territories in which Australia wanted to retain a military interest. He argued that while Australia recognised Portugal’s continued sovereignty, the Portuguese Government should recognize Australia’s fight to preserve the integrity of Timor against Japanese aggression and should… enter into negotiations with Australia both in relation to the inclusion of Portuguese Timor into an Australian defence zone, and also with a view to closer transport, trade and economic relations with Australia.

---

84 Frei, ‘Japan’s reluctant decision,’ pp. 288-295.
85 Ibid., p. 301.
Given the circumstances under which Portuguese Timor’s ‘integrity’ was violated, Evatt’s boldness is remarkable. But in 1945 the Australian government went so far as to blame Portugal for the Japanese occupation, saying that

> The Portuguese failed us completely in the arrangements made for the defence of Timor… and as a result our forces were left to sustain single-handed in Timor for a long period an epic guerrilla warfare…

Australia attempted to forestall the arrival of Portuguese personnel to accept the Japanese surrender, wanting to perform this function themselves. The transfer of the administration to Portugal could then be managed so as to secure Australia’s own interests. Shortly thereafter, Australia proposed that East Timor should in fact become a United Nations trusteeship. Britain flatly rejected this line of thinking, having earlier agreed to fully accept Portugal’s sovereignty over all its pre-war possessions. Portugal itself was determined to resume its administration. Eventually, Australia had to content itself with vague promises that Portugal would accommodate Australia’s communication and defence needs. This came to little, and the tiny territory once more for the most part faded out of Australia’s consciousness. Australia even closed its consulate in Dili in 1971 due to its perceived lack of importance.

**Decolonisation in East Timor**

This decision was quickly exposed as shortsighted. In April 1974, a group of Portuguese military officers, backed by a mass Left-wing movement, overthrew the dictatorial Caetano regime. Bloody and futile wars being fought against national

---


89 ‘Ibid.


93 Although there was a flurry of interest from Australian officials in the mid 1960s. See Wendy Way, *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976*, Carlton South, Melbourne University Press, 2000, pp. 22-43.

liberation movements in Portugal’s African colonies were a major source of discontent with the dictatorship. As such, the new regime moved rapidly to divest itself of the empire, including East Timor.\(^95\)

There had been sporadic outbursts of armed resistance to Portugal’s rule in Timor throughout the colony’s existence. But these were generally localised revolts led by one or another of East Timor’s traditional ‘kings’, the liurais, rather than anything resembling a modern nationalist movement.\(^96\) An exception to this was a revolt in 1959 in the Viqueque region, which was at least partly inspired by a group of Indonesians who had been involved in the ‘Permesta’ rebellion against the Sukarno government, and who had been granted asylum in the area. The long term impact of these episodic revolts was to provide an inspiring precedent, rather than any ongoing organisation or political tradition.\(^97\)

By 1974, there was a recognisable nationalist sentiment among a handful of young, educated members of the Timorese elite. But their activities before Caetano’s downfall were restricted to informal discussions about the territory’s future, and the publication of articles in East Timor’s limited, and heavily censored, press.\(^98\)

Nonetheless, the new Portuguese regime’s promise that East Timor would be granted self-determination was greeted enthusiastically. Within a few weeks, several new political organisations were formed. All were created by members of the educated elite, but they differed in political outlook, and their attitude towards East Timor’s future.\(^99\)

The Timorese Democratic Union (UDT in its Portuguese initials) was initially the most prominent party. It drew support from the more prosperous Timorese landholders and officials. The UDT came to favour a gradual approach to self-determination, advocating a lengthy federation with Portugal before eventual

independence. The UDT’s main rival was the more Left-wing Timorese Social Democratic Association (ASDT), which gave rise to Fretilin (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) in September. The third major party, although lagging far behind Fretilin and the UDT in popular support, was Apodeti (Timorese Popular Democratic Association). They openly called for integration with Indonesia.\(^{100}\)

The ideology and social basis of Fretilin is worth considering in more detail.\(^{101}\) They adopted a broadly Left-populist political ideology, emphasising the role of the peasantry and calling for complete independence, although only after a transitional period lasting years. This helped them establish a far greater popular following among the peasantry than the UDT, and they built up a mass organisation at the village level. Crucially, Fretilin also began to attract support from Timorese personnel in the Portuguese army, especially those who had served in Africa. However, various claims that Fretilin were Communists, especially from Indonesia and the UDT, were overstated. The party encompassed a range of political views, but even those on the Left wing were more moderate than their opponents suggested.\(^{102}\) Over time the party’s Left wing did gain the ascendancy though, as a lack of support from Portugal and conflict with both Indonesia and the UDT lent credence to more radical strategies.\(^{103}\)

Their ideological differences notwithstanding, the UDT and Fretilin initially shared much common ground. Both were opposed to integration with Indonesia, and both were prepared to be flexible over the timing and details of separation from Portugal. In January 1975 the two parties formed a coalition, demanding a transitional government of three to eight years before independence.\(^{104}\) Formal talks with Portugal on the arrangements for decolonisation began in May. By then, however, there were increasing tensions between the UDT and Fretilin, and even physical clashes between their supporters. In late May, the coalition disintegrated. On August

\(^{100}\) Two other parties, Kota and Trabhalista, attracted only nominal support. Another short lived group proposed integration with Australia, but this possibility was quickly quashed by Canberra. See Dunn, *East Timor: A rough passage to independence*, pp.61-62.

\(^{101}\) The definitive study of Fretilin’s formative period is Hill, *Stirrings of nationalism*.

\(^{102}\) For a detailed account of Fretilin’s ideology and program in this period, see Ibid., pp. 70-94.


\(^{104}\) On this phase of decolonisation, see Dunn, *East Timor: A rough passage to independence*, pp. 64-65, 77-83, 139-142; Jolliffe, *East Timor*, pp. 92-119.
11th the UDT launched a coup, starting a brief civil war between UDT and Fretilin forces.105

Most of Fretilin’s leadership, including a number of military veterans, escaped the coup in Dili. Their party was better organised and enjoyed more popular support than the UDT, and crucially they won over the bulk of the Timorese in the Portuguese army. Fretilin counter-attacked immediately, taking control of the capital by the end of August. Having captured the substantial Portuguese arsenal, Fretilin’s forces quickly drove the UDT towards the West Timor border, along with supporters of Apodeti and other groups. These groups retreated into Indonesia in late September, after being compelled to pledge their future allegiance to the integration cause.

The Portuguese authorities withdrew to Atauro island off Dili. Fretilin therefore set about establishing a provisional administration, while requesting that the Portuguese authorities return and fulfill the obligations of decolonisation.106 As signs of Fretilin’s goodwill, the Portuguese flag continued to fly throughout the territory, the governor’s residence and office stood empty, and the cash reserves in the Portuguese bank were untouched. But discussions on the resumption of Portuguese authority made little progress. Even before the coup, the Portuguese government seems to have decided to leave Timor sooner rather than later, no matter the ramifications for self-determination. Although opposed to Indonesia’s use of force, they offered no practical solutions to the territory’s problems.107 Moreover, they had already privately informed Jakarta that they ‘accepted that the easiest outcome was incorporation into Indonesia through an internationally acceptable act of self-determination.’108 Divided amongst themselves due to domestic political turmoil, the Portuguese became little more than spectators as others decided East Timor’s future.

The Indonesian invasion of East Timor

Long before any of this, however, Indonesia had already decisively intervened in East Timor’s decolonisation. In October 1974 the Indonesian military launched a campaign aimed at destabilising the territory, and ultimately at incorporating it into

105 For accounts of the conflict, see Dunn, East Timor: A rough passage to independence, pp. 139-172; Jolliffe, East Timor, pp. 120-152.
106 For detailed accounts, see Dunn, East Timor: A rough passage to independence, pp. 175-192; Jolliffe, East Timor, pp. 144-165.
108 Jolliffe, East Timor, p. 112.
Indonesia. Decolonisation may not have proceeded peacefully even without this interference, but the East Timorese were never given the opportunity to resolve their own differences. Yet the assertion that Indonesia’s interventions were aimed only at solving existing problems is still common. For example, Woolcott, the Australian ambassador to Indonesia at the time, has argued that

While the use of force by Indonesia cannot be condoned, the abandonment of the colony by Portugal in August 1975, the outbreak of civil war and Fretilin’s unilateral declaration of independence in November established the conditions in which the invasion took place.\footnote{Richard Woolcott, \textit{The hot seat: Reflections on diplomacy from Stalin’s death to the Bali bombings}, Sydney, Harper Collins, 2003, p. 156.}

Former Australian Prime Minister Keating claims that

Civil war had broken out between local groups who wanted independence and others who favoured integration with Indonesia and were supported by Jakarta. The main pro-independence group, Fretelin [sic], was tied up with the Portuguese Communist Party.\footnote{Keating, \textit{Engagement}, p. 128.}

By shifting the blame away from Indonesia, such accounts seek to exonerate Australia from its own support for the invasion.\footnote{It was a tactic Whitlam also used at the time, for example see ‘Document 191, Cablegram to Jakarta, Lisbon and New York, 27 August 1975,’ in Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: \textit{Australia and the Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976}, ed. Wendy Way, Carlton South, Melbourne University Press, 2000. For further post-facto examples see \textit{East Timor in Transition 1998-2000: An Australian policy challenge}, Canberra, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2001, pp. 10-11; J. Mackie, ‘Australia and Indonesia,’ \textit{Australian Journal of International Affairs} 55, no. 1 (2001), pp. 34-35; Whitlam, \textit{Abiding interests}, p. 74.}

Indonesia’s campaign to incorporate East Timor, codenamed ‘Operation Komodo’, began in October 1974, although it did not gather momentum until early 1975.\footnote{On Indonesia’s propaganda activities, see Desmond Ball and Hamish McDonald, \textit{Death in Balibo lies in Canberra}, St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 2000, pp. 12-19; Dunn, \textit{East Timor: A rough passage to independence}, pp. 94-101.}

Initially the campaign was one of propaganda, rather than military intervention. Indonesia was aided by Apodeti, which in return for financial backing became Jakarta’s mouthpiece. Indonesia also broadcast radio propaganda from West Timor, and spread undercover agents throughout the territory. Realising that Apodeti had little popular support, Indonesia focused on destabilising East Timor by creating conflict between the parties opposed to integration. They denounced Fretilin as being...
Communist, and claimed that they had massacred Apodeti members and that Chinese Communist forces were in the territory. At the same time, Indonesia impressed on the other political groups, in particular the UDT, that they would not tolerate a Communist aligned East Timor. Early in August, they told the UDT that Fretilin was planning a coup, and that Indonesia would respond by invading. This could not but encourage the UDT to take what it saw as pre-emptive action against their Left-wing rivals.  

As Dunn writes,

“There is no evidence that the Indonesians were directly involved in the planning of the UDT move, but it was clearly the desired outcome of Indonesian meddling and subversion… Operasi Komodo sought to exploit and magnify out of all proportion political differences common to most decolonisations, including the experience of Indonesia.”

Indonesia took Fretilin’s victory as an opportunity to shift from propaganda to military intervention. Initially this action remained covert. Apodeti and UDT troops were used as cover for Indonesian troops to penetrate East Timor from the western part of the island. On October 7th they captured Batugade, close to the border. Despite increasingly stiff resistance from Falintil (Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor), Fretilin’s military wing, Indonesia gradually gained territory near the border. On October 16th Indonesian forces attacked and captured the town of Balibo, resulting in the deaths of five journalists working for Australian television news services (known as the Balibo Five). While the precise details of their deaths remain uncertain, it seems most likely that the journalists were deliberately killed by Indonesian soldiers. The regional capital of Maliana was captured at the same time. From mid November Atabae, well into East Timor, was bombarded by air and sea. On the morning of November 28th, the town fell to the Indonesians.

It was now clear that Indonesia intended to incorporate East Timor by force, but Fretilin’s calls for international assistance went unheeded. In response, they decided

---

114 Ibid., pp. 100-101.
116 The most detailed discussion of the events is Ball and McDonald, *Death in Balibo*, especially pp. 100-113.
to abandon their policy of recognising Portugal’s continued sovereignty. In a hasty ceremony in Dili on November 28th, Fretilin President Xavier do Amaral unilaterally declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of East Timor. In part, Fretilin hoped that declaring independence might give them some status in the international arena. Perhaps more importantly, the declaration was intended as a rallying point for resistance by the East Timorese people. One Fretilin leader stated ‘It is not that we want to be independent yet, or that we are ready for it. But if we are going to fight to the end, we can at least die independent.’

Indonesia, however, used the declaration as an excuse to launch an outright invasion of East Timor. On December 7th Indonesian forces landed in Dili. Up to 2000 civilians were murdered over the next several days, including hundreds of the city’s Chinese population, as well as Australian journalist Roger East. Even some Apodeti supporters were killed. This was just the beginning of East Timor’s suffering. It has been estimated that by 1980 as many as 200,000 East Timorese, or over one quarter of the population, had died as a result of Indonesia’s invasion, mainly due to starvation and disease.

But resistance to the invasion was far stronger than Indonesia expected. Fretilin retreated into the formidable mountains which cover most of East Timor, where they had already stockpiled supplies. Falintil inflicted heavy casualties on Indonesia’s troops, and after a few month the latter’s offensive had stalled. Even at the end of 1976 Fretilin was in control of most of the interior, although Indonesia held the towns and villages. Large numbers of civilians retreated along with Falintil and Fretilin’s leadership, and a functioning national administration was established. However, in early 1977 Indonesia launched a massive new offensive. Suffering from continual aerial bombardment and a severe lack of food, by 1978 most of the civilian population had been forced to return to Indonesian held territory. In December 1978

---

120 Ibid., pp. 243-249.
121 Ibid., pp. 277-278.
the East Timorese president, Nicolau Lobato, was killed. Mere survival became the priority for Falintil and Fretilin for the next several years.

**Australian support for the Indonesian invasion**

From September 1974, Australia consistently supported and encouraged Indonesia’s incorporation of East Timor, and assisted in maintaining the operation’s secrecy. Prime Minister Whitlam and President Suharto held two crucial meetings on September 6th 1974, in Jogjakarta and then Wonosobo. At this point, Whitlam took personal control of policy on Timor, in close consultation with Richard Woolcott, Deputy Secretary of the Department until he became ambassador to Indonesia in March 1975. Whitlam established the two planks of Australian policy, namely that Australia wanted to see East Timor incorporated into Indonesia, but through a process of self-determination. In Jogjakarta, he told Suharto that

> he felt two things were basic to his own thinking on Portuguese Timor. First, he believed that Portuguese Timor should become part of Indonesia. Second, this should happen in accordance with the properly expressed wishes of the people of Portuguese Timor.

Whitlam went on to say that

> he believed that Portuguese Timor was too small to be independent. It was economically unviable. Independence would be unwelcome to Indonesia, to Australia and to other countries in the region, because an independent Portuguese Timor would inevitably become the focus of attention of others outside the region.

The need for self-determination was given greater emphasis in a letter from Whitlam to Suharto on February 28th 1975, which stated that

> We agreed that the solution which we preferred was that the territory should become part of Indonesia, but that this outcome would need to result from the

---

123 The first president, Xavier do Amaral, was deposed in September 1977, charged with treason by other members of Fretilin’s Central Committee.


125 Ibid., pp. 95-96.
properly expressed wishes of its people. Both of us recognised the importance of self-determination in Portuguese Timor… 126

The letter also argued that the dangers of an independent East Timor had receded. Whitlam was more encouraging of Indonesia’s plans, however, when he met Suharto in Townsville on April 4th 1975, saying only

that he still hoped that Portuguese Timor would be associated with or integrated into Indonesia; but this result should be achieved in a way which would not upset the Australian people. 127

Defenders of Whitlam’s policy cite his repeated references to self-determination as evidence that it was made clear to Indonesia that the incorporation of East Timor must be voluntary and peaceful incorporation. 128

This argument fails on two counts. First, far more important than the diplomatic niceties of Whitlam’s statement was the overall impression of Australia’s position that Suharto gained in the meetings. 129 As such, it was significant that Whitlam stressed in the first place that Australia wanted Indonesia to incorporate East Timor, only adding afterwards that the wishes of the East Timorese should be respected. Even Whitlam’s more strongly worded letter in February was moderated by Woolcott’s assurance that there had been no change in Australia’s position from September, that is, support for incorporation, and was taken to mean as much by Suharto. 130 Moreover, Whitlam never asked Indonesia to commit to anything concrete beyond its own existing public support for self-determination in East Timor. As Bell notes, Australia’s objection to the use of force in incorporating East Timor is

128 For example, Greg Sheridan, ‘Papers expose myths,’ The Australian, 13 September 2000, p. 22; Richard Woolcott, ‘Facts battle conspiracy theories,’ The Australian, 13 September 2000, p. 25. Despite their more critical examinations, Renouf, Dalrymple and Mackie also emphasise that Indonesia was aware that Australia objected to the use of force. Dalrymple, Continental drift: Australia’s search for a regional identity, pp. 195-201; Mackie, ‘Australia and Indonesia,’ pp. 139-141; Renouf, The frightened country, pp. 445-448.
129 See Ball and McDonald, Death in Balibo, p. 12.
‘one of the standard pieties of international discourse, and unless some kind of ‘or else’ is unmistakably implied it is seldom effective.’

Second, Australia’s knowledge of Indonesia’s covert activities must be taken into account. Australia was given extraordinarily good intelligence on Indonesia’s East Timor policy by key figures in the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a Jakarta think tank with close links to Indonesian military intelligence. This material was so revealing that it made Australia complicit in the covert operations. Possibly, it was precisely to compromise Australia’s position that the information was leaked, a concern recognised by some in the Department, as well as by Foreign Minister Willesee. To this material must be added Australia’s considerable ability to gather signals intelligence relating to Indonesia’s field operations in East Timor. In short, from mid 1974 Australia was aware of all of Indonesia’s propaganda and covert military activities in East Timor. As Cotton argues, in the light of such information, Australia’s continued protestations that East Timor must only become part of Indonesia voluntarily were meaningless, and intended only for the public record.

Moreover, Whitlam and Australian officials were sometimes quite explicit that this was the case. In July 1974, the Australian ambassador in Jakarta warned that Suharto must not raise the issue of covert operations when he met with Whitlam, because the latter would have to express his disapproval, ‘as he could never be on the record as having even tacitly acquiesced to such a proposal.’ Whitlam himself in his September meeting with Suharto ‘noted that, for the domestic audience in Australia,

---

134 See Ball and McDonald, Death in Balibo, pp. 79-99.
incorporation into Indonesia should appear to be a natural process arising from the wishes of the people.’\textsuperscript{137} Shortly after this meeting, Whitlam is quoted as saying that

\begin{quote}
I am in favour of incorporation but obeisance has to be made to self determination. I want it incorporated but [not]… in a way which will create argument in Australia which would make people more critical of Indonesia.\textsuperscript{138}
\end{quote}

The vital issue was the \textit{appearance} of self-determination in order to placate the Australian public, and not any genuine concern for the rights of the East Timorese. Australia also actively helped maintain this appearance, rather than use its intelligence capability to discourage Indonesia’s campaign.\textsuperscript{139} Jakarta required at least a measure of deniability for its propaganda and military interventions, because it was presenting the conflict in East Timor as a civil war, with Indonesia eventually acceding to a ‘request’ for incorporation by the majority of East Timorese. The Australian government knew from an early stage that this was pure fabrication, but scrupulously avoided revealing Indonesia’s involvement. For example, Whitlam told parliament in August 1975 that

\begin{quote}
Indonesian policy is to respect the right of the people of Portuguese Timor to self-determination and Indonesian leaders have often denied that Indonesia has any territorial ambitions towards Portuguese Timor.\textsuperscript{140}
\end{quote}

There was also government interference with the Australian media. At the time of the UDT coup, Defence Minister Bill Morrison secretly ordered the Australian Navy and Air Force to try to prevent journalists from traveling to Dili, limiting potential witnesses should Indonesian take the opportunity to intervene.\textsuperscript{141}

Australia’s contribution to Indonesia’s covert campaign peaked with the killing of the Balibo Five. Just hours after the attack, Australian intelligence indicated that the journalists had been killed, but the government publicly denied knowledge of their deaths until the story broke in the Indonesian media. Australia never revealed its

\textsuperscript{137} ‘Document 26, Record of meeting between Whitlam and Soeharto, 6 September 1974,’ p. 96.
\textsuperscript{139} Ball and McDonald, \textit{Death in Balibo}, pp. 69-71. Ball and McDonald stress that in addition to diplomatic concerns, Australia wanted to avoid revealing its signals intelligence capabilities to the Indonesians. See also Dunn, \textit{East Timor: A rough passage to independence}, pp. 187-188.
\textsuperscript{140} ‘Document 191, Cablegram to Jakarta, Lisbon and New York, 27 August 1975,’ p. 347.
\textsuperscript{141} Ball and McDonald, \textit{Death in Balibo}, p. 31.
knowledge that Indonesian forces were responsible for the attack.\textsuperscript{142} Even on October 30\textsuperscript{th}, and under intense media pressure over the Balibo killings, Willesee stated in parliament that Australia ‘would be extremely disappointed’ to learn that Indonesia was intervening militarily in East Timor.\textsuperscript{143} As such, the Australian government was publicly backing Indonesia’s claims of non-involvement, although they had already been informed that Indonesia intended to take Dili by November.\textsuperscript{144}

Not surprisingly, Indonesian policy makers concluded that Australia supported the invasion of East Timor, or at worst considered it a minor concern. In October 1974, Ali Murtopo, one of the architects of Indonesia’s campaign for incorporation, told an Australian diplomat

\begin{quote}
that until Mr Whitlam’s visit to Djakarta they had been undecided about Timor. However the Prime Minister’s support for the idea of incorporation into Indonesia had helped to crystallize their own thinking and they were now firmly convinced of the wisdom of this course.\textsuperscript{145}
\end{quote}

Crucially, Suharto was originally reluctant to use outright force to incorporate East Timor, only being persuaded by his more hawkish generals after months of deliberation. Even in September 1975 Suharto resisted pressure from the military to take advantage of Fretilin’s victory over the UDT as an excuse for decisive intervention.\textsuperscript{146} Suharto was concerned that Indonesia’s international reputation would be severely damaged. He could not help but be reassured by Whitlam’s positive response to Indonesia’s covert actions.

Australia’s support for Indonesia was matched by the United States, which saw Indonesia as a bulwark against Communism in the region.\textsuperscript{147} Visiting Jakarta just days before Indonesia’s invasion, President Ford assured Suharto that ‘We will understand and will not press you on the issue. We understand the problem you have

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., pp. 116-127.
\textsuperscript{143} Cited in Ibid., pp. 132-133.
\textsuperscript{144} Goldsworthy, et al., ‘Reorientation,’ pp. 365-366.
\textsuperscript{146} See Dunn, East Timor: A rough passage to independence, pp. 155-157, 188-189.
and the intentions you have.’ United States Secretary of State Kissinger expressed concern that the use of weapons supplied by the United States could create political problems, and asked Suharto not to move until after he and Ford had returned home. But he added ‘whatever you do, however, we will try to handle in the best way possible.’ Like Australia, the United States favoured East Timor’s integration, but wanted to avoid any public involvement.

**Whitlam’s realism**

Despite his Left-wing reputation in other areas of foreign policy making, Whitlam’s approach to the question of East Timor was solidly within the realist mode of thinking. Unfortunately for the East Timorese, their push for independence came at ‘the plausible apex of Communism’s strange parabola of power in the modern world.’ In this context Australia’s policy was dominated by two equally important strategic concerns; the need to maintain a good relationship with Indonesia, and an aversion to the creation of a small and unstable state close to Australian territory.

As previously discussed, Whitlam highly valued the strategic importance of Suharto’s friendly attitude towards Australia. He was certainly not prepared to risk relations over East Timor. As Woolcott argued,

> Whatever Government is in power in Indonesia and, indeed, whatever Government might be in power in Australia, the price of a hostile or unstable Indonesia for Australia would be very high.

This was simply a higher priority than the fate of East Timor, as he made explicit the following August:

> There is no doubt in my mind that our relations with Indonesia in the long-term are more important to us than the future of Portuguese Timor… I know I am suggesting that our principles should be tempered by the proximity of

---


149 Ibid.


Indonesia and its importance to us and by the relative unimportance of Portuguese Timor but, in my view, this is where our national interest lies.\textsuperscript{153}

On its own though, the desire to promote good relations with Indonesia does not fully explain Whitlam’s policy, which did not merely accede to an Indonesian \textit{fait accompli} in East Timor, but positively encouraged Indonesian intervention when this policy was still in formation. An equally important factor was that Australia itself did not want to see a small and ‘unviable’ state created nearby, which could potentially provide an opening to a hostile power.\textsuperscript{154} Fretilin’s Leftist image did not help, but Whitlam also had a general aversion to the creation of ‘microstates’ in the region.\textsuperscript{155} His statements to Suharto that an independent East Timor would be unviable and prey to outside powers have already been quoted. Similar views were held within the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). A planning paper prepared soon after the fall of the Caetano government stated that

…Portuguese Timor is not at present a viable economic entity and for this reason and the absence of any local political elite, it would have no capability in the short-term to handle a self-governing or independent status.\textsuperscript{156}

In July 1974, the Australian ambassador to Indonesia wrote that

the thought of a poor, uneducated, probably unstable, independent Eastern Timor on our doorstep, and susceptible to subversion and exploitation by other Powers, should be no more attractive to us than to Indonesia.\textsuperscript{157}

But it was Woolcott who most strongly argued that Australia had a positive interest in incorporation. Before Whitlam’s meeting with Suharto in April 1975, he claimed that too great a stress on self-determination in East Timor ‘can be equated with a


\textsuperscript{157} ‘Document 17, Letter from Furlonger to Feakes, 30 July 1974,’ p. 73.
demand for independence. Do we want actually to encourage an independent East Timor? I would doubt it.¹⁵⁸ Later in 1975, when it was clear that Indonesia was determined to forcibly incorporate East Timor, Woolcott could present the inevitable as also being desirable, arguing

there is now very little likelihood of a proper act of self-determination taking place in Portuguese Timor and that Australia’s best long-term interests, as well as those of Indonesia, and possibly even those of the majority of the indigenous Timorese in East Timor, are likely to be served by the incorporation of Portuguese Timor into Indonesia.¹⁵⁹

Australia’s basic policy thinking thus matched Indonesia’s own concern, at least partly genuinely held, that an independent East Timor would pose a security threat.¹⁶⁰ As Woolcott explained,

the Indonesians… are determined not to permit either an Angolan or Cuban type situation to develop in the middle of the Indonesian Archipelago; nor would Australia want such situations on its northern doorstep.¹⁶¹

A secondary consideration in Whitlam’s policy was his desire to dissociate Australia from the colonial legacy in Southeast Asia.¹⁶² Good relations with Indonesia, in which the nations dealt with each other as respected equals, were a key part of this policy. As regards East Timor, Whitlam told Suharto that he would resist both the Right, which retained its colonial mindset, and the Left, which ‘tended to be paternalistic, patronising and wholly convinced of their purity’, and hence given to criticism of other countries’ domestic policies.¹⁶³ Moreover, Whitlam portrayed East Timor’s existence separate to Indonesia as an accident resulting from the struggles between the European colonial powers.¹⁶⁴ East Timor was actually ‘part of the

¹⁶⁰ Dunn, East Timor: A rough passage to independence, pp. 92-93.
¹⁶³ ‘Document 123, Record of conversation between Whitlam and Soeharto, 4 April 1975,’ p. 244.
¹⁶⁴ A true enough point, but one which applies equally to the boundary between Malaysia and Indonesia, or between West Papua and Papua New Guinea. See Salla, ‘Australian foreign policy and East Timor,’ p. 162.
Indonesian world’, and incorporation was the most sensible path to decolonisation.\footnote{Cited in Cotton, ‘Twenty-five years of the policy debate,’ p. 5.}

Whitlam and Woolcott also repeatedly noted that most of the East Timorese independence leaders were of mixed European and Timorese descent, although what relevance their racial background had for the legitimacy of their political views was not made clear.\footnote{For example, ‘Document 123, Record of conversation between Whitlam and Soeharto, 4 April 1975,’ p. 245; ‘Document 196, Cablegram to Canberra, 28 August 1975,’ in Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976, ed. Wendy Way, Carlton South, Melbourne University Press, 2000, p. 354; ‘Document 234, Cablegram to Canberra, 17 September 1975,’ in Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976, ed. Wendy Way, Carlton South, Melbourne University Press, 2000, p. 421.}

Cotton comments that the Whitlam-Woolcott policy represented a rare alignment between realism and idealism in foreign policy making.\footnote{James Cotton, East Timor, Australia and regional order: Intervention and its aftermath in Southeast Asia, London, Routledge Curzon, 2004, p. 10.} This ignores the policy’s contradiction with Australia’s supposed support for the principles of national self-determination and human rights. As we have seen, self-determination was hypocritically ‘paid obeisance’ in public, but in practice was totally ignored.

Woolcott justified this with the tortured logic that since there had not been ‘proper acts of self-determination’ in Portugal’s other colonies, it was not worth ‘impaling ourselves on the hook of self-determination’ in the case of East Timor.\footnote{‘Document 121, Letter from Woolcott to Whitlam, 2 April 1975,’ p. 241.} This obscured the fact that independence had been obviously popular in Portugal’s other colonies, but that in East Timor there was little genuine support for integration with Indonesia, as Woolcott himself recognised.\footnote{For example, see ‘Document 137, Dispatch to Willesee, 2 June 1975,’ in Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976, ed. Wendy Way, Carlton South, Melbourne University Press, 2000, p. 265.}

Ultimately, which principles came to the fore in Whitlam’s policy, and the way in which they were applied, was determined by Australia’s strategic interests. This was infamously acknowledged by Woolcott in an August 1975 cable, later leaked to the press, in which he admitted ‘…I am recommending a pragmatic rather than a principled stand, but this is what national interest and foreign policy is all about…’\footnote{‘Document 169, Cablegram to Canberra, 17 August 1975,’ in Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976, ed. Wendy Way, Carlton South, Melbourne University Press, 2000, p. 314.}
This realist logic permeated the entire Australian government, although there were differences of opinion over its application. Pritchett, in the Department of Defence, argued that Australia must deny East Timor to any potentially hostile power, including Indonesia. An independent East Timor, which would look to Australia for security, should therefore be encouraged. This position was rejected by the DFA, and later by the Department of Defence itself, on the grounds that Australian dominance in East Timor was useless if it came at the price of Indonesian hostility, and that an independent East Timor might become a source of instability.

There was also some disagreement within the DFA. Renouf, the Secretary, has claimed that the Department favoured making self-determination the main element of Australia’s position, and that Whitlam’s strong support for incorporation went beyond his departmental brief for the meetings with Suharto. As time went on, both Willesee and departmental officers repeatedly raised the central problem in Australia’s public position on East Timor, that is, the contradiction between supporting an unpopular and forced integration and supporting self-determination. However, Willesee continued defending the policy in public. Moreover, neither Willesee nor senior figures in his Department put forward a convincing policy alternative to the Whitlam-Woolcott line, and they only expressed their uncertainties after Whitlam’s crucial first meeting with Suharto. It was never argued that self-


173 Renouf, The frightened country, pp. 442-444.


determination must be made the cornerstone of Australian policy as a matter of principle.


Until 1999, the basic pattern of Indonesian-Australian relations followed Whitlam’s lead. Successive Australian governments, both Liberal and Labor, emphasised the need to maintain friendly relations between the countries. However, this approach was not popular among the Australian public. The Suharto regime’s corruption and human rights abuses, particularly in East Timor, continually threatened to derail the relationship.

The Fraser and Hawke governments

In opposition, both Malcolm Fraser and Bob Hawke indicated they might take a more critical stance over East Timor than Whitlam. However, as Cotton notes, once in power they were constrained by the ‘responsibilities’ of government to shift their position in favour of Indonesia. In opposition and as caretaker prime minister, Fraser was highly critical of Whitlam’s handling of the East Timor issue, but he stressed that he understood Indonesia’s concerns, particularly given Fretilin’s Leftist leanings. His new government also reiterated the importance of relations with Indonesia. But on December 12th 1975, a few days before the federal election, Australia supported a UN General Assembly resolution which deplored Indonesia’s invasion of East Timor. Fraser also publicly supported self-determination in East Timor. Bilateral tensions at the time were increased by Australian protectionism against Indonesian manufacturers. In an attempt to improve relations, Australia increased aid to Indonesia from mid-1976, including military aid. Fraser also visited Indonesia in June 1976, but if anything this was counter-productive, because he refused to recognise Indonesia’s de facto sovereignty over East Timor, despite being briefed to do so by the DFA. The Indonesians saw Fraser’s policy as ambiguous at best, and a reversal of Whitlam’s position.

But gradually the desire to improve relations with Jakarta led to increasing Australian support for the Indonesian occupation. From late 1976 the government toned down its criticism of Indonesia, and refused to reconfirm its support for self-determination. In 1977 the government agreed to close down an unlicensed radio link with East Timor, which was being operated out of Darwin by Australian sympathizers of Fretilin, in particular members of the CPA. This covert operation was at that time the resistance movement’s only link to the outside world.\footnote{For accounts from participants, see Chris Elenor, ‘Calling Fretilin,’ in \textit{A few rough reds: Stories of rank and file organising}, ed. Hall Alexander and Phil Griffiths, Canberra, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Canberra Region Branch, 2003; Brian Manning, ‘Charlie India Tango calling Timor Leste,’ in \textit{A few rough reds: Stories of rank and file organising}, ed. Hall Alexander and Phil Griffiths, Canberra, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Canberra Region Branch, 2003.} In January 1978 the government extended \textit{de facto} recognition of Indonesian sovereignty. This decision has been justified as bowing to an unchangeable reality, and as allowing Australia to provide humanitarian aid to the people of East Timor,\footnote{\textit{East Timor in Transition 1998-2000}, pp. 11-13.} although this aid was directed through the Indonesian government rather than the Red Cross. But blatant self-interest was behind the extension of \textit{de jure} recognition early in 1979, which was a precondition for negotiations between Australian and Indonesia over seabed oil and gas resources located in the so-called ‘Timor Gap’, the stretch of water where the international border between Australia and East Timor remained undefined.

Labor leader Hawke criticised recognition when in opposition, and also called for an end to military aid for Indonesia.\footnote{On Hawke’s policy, see Catley and Dugis, \textit{Australian Indonesian relations}, pp. 160-162.} The 1982 party conference reaffirmed Labor’s support for self-determination for East Timor. But once in office, Hawke reversed this stance. Along with Minister for Foreign Affairs Bill Hayden, he made an early visit to Indonesia, reassuring Suharto that there would be no dramatic change in Australian policy. The 1984 party conference again condemned Indonesia’s annexation of East Timor, but revoked opposition to recognition of Indonesian sovereignty. In 1985 Hawke began to openly express support for \textit{de facto} recognition, continued opposition from the Left of the party notwithstanding.

Despite apparent agreement over East Timor, Australia-Indonesia relations remained brittle during the mid-1980s. This was illustrated by the so-called ‘Jenkins affair’ of
1986. In April, Australian journalist David Jenkins wrote an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* documenting the corruption of Suharto’s family and associates, and suggesting that the regime might be toppled by a ‘people power’ revolt, like the Marcos regime in the Philippines. Indonesia reacted strongly. B.J. Habibie, Minister for Research and Technology, cancelled a trip to Australia, and negotiations over the Timor Gap were suspended. Visa restrictions were imposed on Australian journalists, and visa-free entry for Australian tourists cancelled, although this last decision was quickly reversed. It was of great concern to the Australian government that one newspaper article, over which it had no control, could disrupt relations to such an extent.

*Putting ballast in the relationship? The Keating-Evans years*

Gareth Evans, appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs in 1988, set out to address this weakness in the relationship. Similar ambitions were held by his newly appointed Indonesian counterpart, Ali Alatas. Their goal was to focus on practical measures which would ‘build up the relationship, layer by layer, across a wide range of activities, including defence, culture and commerce.’ This would provide the relationship ‘stabilizing ballast’, substantial, long-term mutual interests, the weight of which would not be disturbed by short-term political flare-ups. Establishing a more stable relationship with Indonesia was a crucial part of Evans’ wider drive to integrate Australia with the Southeast Asian region, as discussed in Chapter One.

There were two main aspects to Evans’ approach. First, he established a more substantial institutional framework for the relationship, including more frequent person-to-person contact between the governments, at both ministerial and departmental level. A number of departments were involved, an extension of traditional visits by Foreign Affairs and Defence officials. As minister, Evans himself visited Indonesia 14 times between 1988 and 1995. Between August 1988 and June 1994 there were 87 high-level ministerial visits, going in both directions.

---

181 Ibid., pp. 162-166.
183 Evans, ‘Australia’s relations with Indonesia,’ p. 1.
184 A detailed account is given in Catley and Dugis, *Australian Indonesian relations*, pp. 211-222.
185 Ibid., p. 215.
Ties between Australian and Indonesian academics were also strengthened, including the founding of the Australia-Indonesia Institute, and there were likewise increased military contacts.

The second aspect of Evans’ approach was to increase economic activity between the countries, which would provide the pragmatic ballast. There was considerable enthusiasm about the growth of the Indonesian economy in the early 1990s, and the possibility of resultant trade with Australia. The executive summary of one bilateral symposia enthused about ‘new complementarities’ and ‘regional synergies’, suggesting that by the year 2020, Indonesia could be our fifth largest export destination. Already it is our tenth largest export destination, and our twelfth largest source of imports.

Evans’ approach was bolstered when Paul Keating became Prime Minister in December 1991. When he visited Jakarta early in 1992, he stated that ‘no country is more important to Australia than Indonesia.’ Keating built a close personal relationship with Suharto, visiting Indonesia six times in the four years he was Prime Minister. Person-to-person links were further enhanced by the institution of the annual Australia-Indonesia Ministerial Forum in 1993.

Relations with Indonesia were not as thoroughly transformed as Evans and Keating had hoped. They relied heavily on key personal relationships, or so-called ‘mateship diplomacy’, which worked in the short-term but had obvious limitations. Nor did economic relations develop as strongly as expected, as discussed below. The Asian economic crisis, changes of government in both countries, and the East Timor independence process exposed these weaknesses in the late 1990s.

---

186 Typical results of this academic work were *Expanding horizons: Australia and Indonesia into the 21st century*, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1994; Desmond Ball and Helen Wilson, eds., *Strange neighbours: The Australia-Indonesia relationship* North Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1991.


188 Cited in Catley and Dugis, *Australian Indonesian relations*, p. 216.

189 In contrast, Hawke visited just once in nine years. Ibid., p. 218.
Nonetheless, the new approach did yield tangible diplomatic successes, exemplified in two important treaties. The first was the Timor Gap treaty, signed in December 1989, which concluded 10 years of difficult negotiations. The treaty sidestepped the contentious issue of setting a permanent international border, by agreeing to share revenue from oil and gas production in the disputed area between the two countries. The deal promised substantial economic benefits for both sides, although production had barely began when the arrangement was nullified by the independence of East Timor. Evans cited the treaty as the most substantial example of using mutual economic benefit to overcome potential conflict between Australia and Indonesia.

The second treaty was the Australia-Indonesia Agreement on Maintaining Security (AMS), signed in December 1995. This relatively weak agreement only committed the countries to consult over threats to their mutual security, but it served as a formal marker that the countries sought defence cooperation, rather than confrontation. It supported Australia’s wider approach to regional based security, reflecting the view of the 1994 Defence White Paper that ‘the defence relationship with Indonesia is our most important in the region’. The government had no confidence that the Australian public shared this view. The treaty was negotiated in great secrecy, because, as Keating himself explained, ‘if there had been a more public process there probably wouldn’t have been a treaty.’

**The ‘pebble in the shoe’ of Australian-Indonesian relations**

Keating thus admitted the major problem for the Australian government in its new approach to Indonesia: ongoing domestic criticism over Indonesia’s human rights record, particularly in East Timor. Ali Alatas once claimed that East Timor was a ‘pebble in Indonesia’s shoe’, an ongoing irritant perhaps, but nonetheless of minor importance.
importance. Evans and Keating did what they could to minimise the pain. Human rights were considered important, but they must not dominate or threaten Australia’s relations with Indonesia. According to Keating,

I held few conversations with Indonesian leaders in which I did not raise Timor or Irian Jaya, but I was not prepared to make the whole of our complex relationship with 210 million people subject to this one issue.

When it did raise the issue of East Timor, Australia focused on persuading the Indonesian government to make practical improvements in the lives of the East Timorese people.

But it was hard to reconcile this emphasis with the fact that the main problem in East Timor was the brutality of the Indonesian military, a military which Australia was helping to train. On November 12th 1991, as many as 273 unarmed protestors were killed by the Indonesian military at the Santa Cruz cemetery in Dili, while others disappeared in the following police crackdown. The killings drew international condemnation, mainly because the events were captured on film. For Evans, however, this incident was merely an ‘aberration’, while even years later Keating argued that it was due to ‘an appalling lapse of control by individual security forces on the ground in Dili rather than deliberate policy instructions from Jakarta.’ Keating visited Jakarta shortly after the massacre, a show of support for Suharto when he was under considerable international pressure. Australian training of Indonesian military officers actually increased in the mid-1990s, as United States assistance was scaled down.

Santa Cruz was no aberration. In fact, it was a relatively minor incident compared to episodes such as the infamous ‘fence of legs’ operations in the 1980s, in which Timorese civilians were forced to march ahead of advancing Indonesian troops, encircling Falintil positions. Moreover, the massacre only came about because of the ongoing resistance of the East Timorese population. Far from winning over

---

196 Cited in Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, p. 16.
198 Keating, Engagement, p. 130.
199 Evans and Grant, Australia’s foreign relations in the world of the 1990s, p. 187.
200 Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, p. 15.
201 Cited in Ibid., p. 43.
202 Keating, Engagement, p. 129.
203 Catley and Dugis, Australian Indonesian relations, p. 218.
204 Lowry, ‘Australia-Indonesia security cooperation: For better or worse?’ p. 8.
205 Dunn, East Timor: A rough passage to independence, pp. 294, 296.
‘indigenous’ East Timorese as Whitlam and Woolcott had hoped, the brutality of the occupation had only encouraged further resistance, as did the social and economic inequalities suffered by the Timorese.  

A revitalised resistance movement emerged in the early 1980s, under the leadership of Xanana Gusmão. He shifted emphasis away from Falintil’s armed resistance, instead building up a clandestine civilian movement in East Timor’s towns, as well as among Timorese students in Indonesia. Gusmão also created a new political coalition, the CNRM (National Council of Maubere Resistance), open to any group opposed to the occupation, including the UDT. Gusmão’s capture and imprisonment in 1992 only served to draw international attention, and Indonesia failed to make headway against the reconstituted resistance.

In Australia, there was ongoing opposition to the Indonesian occupation from various East Timor solidarity campaign groups, who drew support from Left-wing political organisations, churches and sections of the union movement. This movement was not strong enough to force a change of policy, but it ensured the issue could never be completely buried. Suharto was never again able to visit Australia, because he would have attracted embarrassingly large protests. In 1995, Indonesia’s nominated ambassador to Australia had to be replaced due to public outcry over his service in East Timor and support for the perpetrators of the Santa Cruz massacre. There was also sporadic attention from the media, fuelled by events such as the Santa Cruz massacre and the joint awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 to Fretilin spokesperson José Ramos-Horta and Timorese Bishop Carlos Belo.

In 1974-1975, some more far-sighted officials and commentators warned that East Timor could become, in the words of one, a ‘running sore’ for Indonesia, and hence an ongoing political problem for Australia. So it proved. Although easing bilateral

relations at one level, Australian support for the invasion of East Timor became a lightning rod for domestic criticism of the Suharto regime for the next quarter century.

4. Themes and analyses of Australia’s relations with Indonesia

This section outlines both realist accounts and liberal critiques of Australian-Indonesian relations, and then suggests how insights offered by both can be more satisfactorily accounted for by a theory of Australian imperialism. Australian attitudes towards both East Timor and Indonesia are considered simultaneously, as policy towards Timor has been dominated by wider geo-strategic considerations over the Indonesian archipelago as a whole.

Indonesia, the crucible of Australian realism

Formulating Australia’s policy towards Indonesia has taxed realism’s ‘problem solving’ abilities to the full. In Renouf’s words, ‘The crucible of Australian foreign policy is Indonesia.’ Despite Woolcott’s appeal that policy towards Indonesia should simply be ‘pragmatic’, exactly what that entails has frequently been controversial. Moreover, hindsight has at times revealed eminently ‘pragmatic’ policies, in particular supporting the invasion of East Timor, as deeply flawed, even from a realist viewpoint.

Several elements have kept Indonesia at the forefront of foreign policy debate in Australia since World War Two. The Indonesian archipelago has an inherent immediacy and weight in Australia’s strategic outlook, due to the seemingly inescapable logic of geography. In addition, Australia has not been able to rely on

---

212 Renouf, The frightened country, p. 349.
the United States to supply a lead in relations with Indonesia. But most importantly, even before its independence was won, Indonesia has appeared as both a potential ally and potential threat to Australia. These geo-strategic elements have dominated realist thinking on Indonesia, with economics a far lesser consideration.

The repeatedly expressed hopes that the two countries might become major trading partners have never been fully realised, largely due to fact that both have traditionally relied heavily on exports of primary commodities. This situation may gradually be changing, in line with the general increase in Australia’s economic engagement with Southeast Asia. As Catley and Dugis argue, from the mid 1980s trade between the countries increased significantly, both in value and diversity, and in the 1990s Australia became one of Indonesia’s top 10 sources of investment. Nonetheless, to date Indonesia still rates as a relatively unimportant economic partner for Australia. Table 1.1 shows Indonesia’s limited importance as a destination for Australian exports compared to other major trading partners. In 2004-05, Indonesia accounted for 2.6% of Australian exports, putting it outside Australia’s top 10 export destinations. Nor, from the Australian perspective, had Indonesia become a vital destination for capital, still accounting for less than half of one percent of total Australian foreign investments by 2004.

In contrast to the relative weakness of economic ties, Canberra has built a substantial and ongoing defence relationship with Jakarta from the late 1960s. Australia has trained Indonesian officers, sold military equipment to Indonesia, and provided financial aid. The two countries have also conducted joint exercises and shared intelligence. During the 1999 East Timor deployment, the odd situation arose that Australia was confronting a military it had helped equip and train. But it is

---

215 Leaver, ‘Introduction: Australia, East Timor and Indonesia,’ p. 3; Renouf, The frightened country, p. 399.
218 Catley and Dugis, Australian Indonesian relations, pp. 239-261.
220 Catley and Dugis, Australian Indonesian relations, pp. 15-154, 280-289.
221 Although commanding officer General Cosgrove argued that it was in fact an advantage that Indonesian troops understood Australia’s superior capabilities. See David Dickens, ‘The United Nations in East Timor: Intervention at the military operational level,’ Contemporary Southeast Asia 23, no. 2 (2001), pp. 228-229.
precisely because Indonesia is a potential threat that Australia engages in the defence relationship.

This is part of a deep-set ambiguity in Australian strategic thinking about its neighbour. As an ally, Indonesia could provide a defensive bulwark against the advance of hostile forces from the north. But a hostile or chaotic Indonesia could pose a threat to Australia’s territorial security or, more likely, wreck havoc with Australia’s vital lines of communication and trade.\(^\text{222}\) Worse, if Indonesia allied with another major power, such as China, it could provide the base for an outright invasion of Australia. Though based on a worst case scenario, this concern is not just a question of paranoia or racism. Renouf, former secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, insisted that Australia must cease being the ‘frightened country’ regarding Asia. But he still emphasised that ‘If there is to be a threat to security in the foreseeable future, it could only come from Indonesia.’\(^\text{223}\)

Renouf has not been alone. Indonesia’s potential penetration by hostile powers has been a consistent concern for Australian policy makers. The fear that Russia might gain influence if Indonesia’s transition to independence was not handled correctly has already been cited, as have concerns about third party interference in an independent East Timor. More recently, some of the reasoning behind the 1995 security agreement with Indonesia was indicated when Keating stated shortly after its signing that Australia wanted to avoid being drawn into ‘the Chinese orbit’.\(^\text{224}\) Assertions that Indonesia had definitively become an ally, such as in the 1994 Defence White Paper or the security agreement itself, were attempts to cement a solution to the problem, rather than proof that it no longer existed. They did nothing to stop fears of conflict with Indonesia reemerging in 1999. Leading security analyst Paul Dibb warned in 2001 that in the context of great power competition Indonesia’s stability was vital to regional security, and that ‘it is advantageous to Australia that a

\(^{222}\) The idea of an actual Indonesian invasion of Australia retains popular appeal. It has, however, been dismissed by defence planners since the fall of Sukarno at the latest, because Indonesia lacks both the motivation and capability to launch such an undertaking. See Lowry, ‘Australia-Indonesia security cooperation: For better or worse?’ p. 7; MacIntyre, ‘Australia-Indonesia relations,’ pp. 146-17.

\(^{223}\) Renouf, *The frightened country*, p. 399.

stable, democratic and unified Indonesia stands astride Australia’s vulnerable northern approaches.\footnote{Paul Dibb, ‘Indonesia: The key to South-East Asia’s security,’ \textit{International Affairs} 77, no. 4 (2001), pp. 832-841. See also Paul Dibb, ‘Alliances, alignments and the global order: The outlook for the Asia Pacific region in the next quarter-century,’ \textit{Strategic and Defence Studies Centre Working Paper} no. 317, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, ANU, 1997}

Since Indonesia’s independence, its strategic importance has led Australia to emphasise both the need for domestic ‘stability’ within Indonesia, as well as the maintenance of the ‘relationship’ between the two countries. The two elements are related, in that domestic instability has been seen as making bilateral relations more difficult, not the least because of the perceived hostility to Australia of Left-wing political forces within Indonesia. Hence Australian support for the moderate wing of the independence movement, or for the anti-Communist Suharto, arose not simply from a need for stability as such, but also the desire for Indonesian regimes which were intrinsically more palatable to Australia.

The concept of the ‘relationship’ has born a particularly heavy burden in realist thought on Indonesia.\footnote{For differing analyses of why this is the case, see Leaver, ‘Introduction: Australia, East Timor and Indonesia,’ pp. 2-3; MacIntyre, ‘Australia-Indonesia relations,’ pp. 148-150.} It serves to obscure the element of strategic fear which largely motivates Australia’s efforts at friendship, as opposed to positive aspects such as goodwill or shared interests. At the same time ‘building the relationship’ is itself the strategy for overcoming Australia’s strategic dilemma. The contradictory basis for the relationship has not gone unnoted by writers in the realist vein. It was clearly exposed by Indonesia’s incorporation of West Papua, when Australia totally failed in its quest to maintain friendly relations while simultaneously restraining Indonesia’s military ambitions, as analysed by both Renouf and Catley and Dugis.\footnote{Catley and Dugis, \textit{Australian Indonesian relations}, p. 27; Renouf, \textit{The frightened country}, pp. 405-425.}

As Viviani discusses, the same elements of fear and friendship were at work in Whitlam’s policy on East Timor, albeit with nearly the opposite policy response.\footnote{Viviani, ‘Australians and the East Timor issue - the policy of the Whitlam government,’ pp. 83-85.}

A 1974 article by Mackie expresses the general dilemma well. He criticises the dominance of security concerns in relations with Indonesia, based on

the crude \textit{realpolitik} argument (rarely made explicit, but perhaps it ought to be) that Australia cannot afford the luxury of antagonising Indonesia, or her government. If it ever comes to a showdown, Indonesia’s hostility could be
seriously disadvantageous to Australia… so her goodwill should be
maintained even at a considerable cost.\textsuperscript{229}

But Mackie goes on to clearly enunciate the reasons why Indonesia has been central
to Australian strategic thought since World War Two.\textsuperscript{230} These factors have
constantly haunted the policy discourse in Australia, threatening even the most
pragmatic accommodation reached with Jakarta.

\textit{The Left liberal critique of Australia-Indonesia relations}

Relations with Indonesia have been a major target of liberal and Left-wing critiques
of Australian foreign policy. The murderous rise of the Suharto regime and its
ongoing suppression of political freedoms were starkly at odds with the common
sense of liberal Australian political values. The invasion of East Timor not only
added to Suharto’s obvious crimes, but served as a focal point for wider criticism of
Australia’s support for the regime, which until then had been muted.\textsuperscript{231}

Eventually, Australia’s support for Suharto drew a withering moral critique from a
variety of positions. This has included some conservative interest in East Timor. For
example, Glover argued in the leading conservative publication \textit{Quadrant} that

\begin{quote}
the treatment of the East Timorese by the Indonesians should outrage all
Australians concerned about human rights, not just those on the left, but
liberals and conservatives as well.\textsuperscript{232}
\end{quote}

Lansell Taudevin, a former clergyman and aid worker in East Timor, wrote in 1999
that

\begin{quote}
The reign of terror unleashed on the East Timorese has cried out for
intervention since 1975. It took until 1999 before the world discovered that
there was a moral stance required…\textsuperscript{233}
\end{quote}

More consistently though, critiques of Australia’s policy towards Indonesia and East
Timor have come from the liberal and Left-nationalist positions. The tone was set by

\textsuperscript{229} Mackie, ‘Australia’s relations with Indonesia: Principles and polices, I,’ p. 4.
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid., pp. 5-9. See also Mackie, ‘Australia’s relations with Indonesia: Principles and polices, II,’ pp. 175-178.
\textsuperscript{231} See Catley and Dugis, \textit{Australian Indonesian relations}, p. 153.
\textsuperscript{233} Lansell Taudevin, \textit{East Timor: Too little too late}, Potts Point, Duffy & Snellgrove, 1999, p. 2.
Dunn’s important 1983 work. His critique was simple but effective, arguing that Whitlam had abandoned Australia’s responsibility towards a small and vulnerable neighbour, one to whom we had a debt to discharge. He failed to take into account the predictable humanitarian consequences of Indonesian aggression against the colony.

Similarly, Burchill criticises Australia’s support of the Suharto regime in general, commenting that

The moral conscience of the outside world was not just undisturbed by the slaughter. An ethical concern about what happened was portrayed by some as a sign of weakness…

Burchill goes on to argue that ‘Absolving Suharto of his crimes is a moral crime in itself.’ Kingsbury likewise denounces Australia’s role in covering up the deaths of possibly hundreds of thousands of civilians in East Timor, as well as broader corruption and human rights abuses, in order to ‘placate’ the Suharto regime.

A recurring theme in critical accounts of the relationship has been the idea of Australian ‘appeasement’ or ‘acquiescence’ towards Indonesia’s human rights abuses, particularly the invasion of East Timor. This line of argument has effectively exposed the moral vacuousness of the realist approach. But as a critical

---

234 Dunn, *A people betrayed*. This work was republished as Dunn, *East Timor: A rough passage to independence*.


237 Burchill, ‘Absolving the dictator,’ p. 29.


tool, the idea of appeasement is severely limited, implicitly resting on several flawed assumptions.\(^{240}\)

Crucially, the term ‘appeasement’ implies that Australia simply gave in to Indonesian demands. But this downplays the realists’ positive embrace of Suharto as a means of attaining Australia’s national interests. As we have seen, Australia did not merely accept Suharto’s rise as inevitable, but actually favoured him as a solution to radicalism in Indonesia, and supported him whenever possible. Likewise, while maintaining relations with Indonesia was one policy goal in supporting the invasion of East Timor, of equal importance was Australia’s own desire to avoid the creation of a potentially unstable neighbour. When Indonesia’s policy was not yet fixed, Australia encouraged Suharto to invade.

Once the positive goals of Australian policy are ignored, ‘appeasement’ can appear as a self-defeating mistake on the part of policy makers. At the time of East Timor’s independence ballot, Kingsbury and Burchill wrote

> The slaughter in East Timor also represents an enormous moral and strategic failure for Australia. Three decades of obsequious fawning to and appeasement of Jakarta have resulted in the collapse of Canberra’s foreign and defence policy.\(^{241}\)

This reflects the general liberal view that a morally based foreign policy is also more rational, as discussed in the preceding chapter. But because it obscures certain aspects of Australia’s policy, the terminology of appeasement and acquiescence is not unique to critical accounts.\(^{242}\) Goldsworthy, for example, writes that Australia ‘acquiesce[d] in the Indonesian incorporation of nearby East Timor, with what turned out to be tragic results’,\(^{243}\) which minimises Australia’s active role in encouraging the invasion. Hirst likewise embraces the term ‘appeasement’ from a conservative perspective.

---


\(^{242}\) See Nevins, *A not-so-distant horror*, p. 16.

perspective, with its implications that there was no alternative to accepting the Indonesian invasion of East Timor.\textsuperscript{244}

Moreover, a critique of Australian policy which opposes ‘appeasement’ can also pave the way for a strident Australian nationalism. An historical analogy with the British policy of appeasement towards Hitler, which was eventually swept away by the Tory and arch-imperialist Winston Churchill, is inherently risky for Left-wing thinkers. It can imply that Australian policy on East Timor did not truly reflect ‘Australian’ values. Birmingham invokes the precedent of the appeasement of Hitler to condemn Australia’s ‘moral cowardice’ in its support for Suharto, and that this

in fact undermined [Australia’s strategic] interests by creating a totally unsustainable paradigm for a relationship between a liberal democracy and a para-corporate military dictatorship.\textsuperscript{245}

Birmingham goes on to celebrate the fact that Australia’s military strength means there is no need to ignore human rights abuses in Indonesia when framing foreign policy.\textsuperscript{246} Similarly, for Haigh,

\begin{quote}
Going into East Timor [in 1999] was never just a matter of peacekeeping, it was also a matter of taking on the TNI [Indonesian Armed Forces] and fronting them down… [Australian General Cosgrove] demonstrated that he wasn’t prepared to stand for any nonsense – a thing which Australian politicians and their representatives overseas had failed to do for 25 years.\textsuperscript{247}
\end{quote}

Dunn argues that the underlying problem is ‘our lack of confidence in our capacity to behave as a truly independent nation.’\textsuperscript{248}

But other than the actions of the Australian state itself, what evidence can there be for the existence of underlying ‘Australian’ values in foreign policy, which have been hidden due to national subservience? Appeal can be made to the opposition of the Australian ‘public’ or ‘people’ to government policy on East Timor,\textsuperscript{249} however

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{244} John Hirst, ‘In defence of appeasement: Indonesia and Australian foreign policy,’ \textit{Quadrant} 40, no. 4 (1996), pp. 10-11.
\bibitem{245} Birmingham, ‘Appeasing Jakarta: Australia’s complicity in the East Timor tragedy,’ p. 2.
\bibitem{248} Dunn, \textit{East Timor: A rough passage to independence}, p. iii.
\end{thebibliography}
this then requires a more thorough analysis of the relation between the state, nationalism and domestic political conflicts. These questions, though, have remained under-theorised in critical accounts of the Australia-Indonesia relationship. As examined in Chapter Six, this had important implications for the possibility of a critical response to Australia’s change of policy towards East Timor in 1999.

It also prevents liberal critiques from adequately accounting for the dominance of what they consider a mistaken policy. Usually they have blamed the ‘Indonesian lobby’, or ‘Jakarta lobby’, a group of bureaucrats and academics who argue that it is in Australia’s national interest to support the Indonesian government’s domestic and international policy.  

Such a group of policy makers has certainly existed, starting from the decision to support Indonesian independence, and solidifying into a more permanent form after Suharto took power. But as an explanation for policy, the idea of the ‘Jakarta lobby’ only poses further questions, such as why such a lobby has arisen, and whose interests they serve. Moreover, it must be recognised that the intellectual and structural coherence of the lobby began to break down with Suharto’s fall from power, and hence its impact on policy waned.

**Indonesia, East Timor and Australian imperialism**

At times, realist rhetoric can fetishise certain concepts, such as the need for stability, or the importance of the relationship with Indonesia, making them seem like goals in themselves, rather than means to an end. As McQueen writes,

> commentators retreat into an operational code where terms such as ‘stability’ gain a mystical significance. ‘Stability’ is but one of several clichés clogging the gutters of international relations.  

Other such clichés include ‘relationship’ and ‘security’. A critique of realism needs to avoid fetishising these terms further, and instead explain their relation to the real world interests of political actors.

---

250 Neither term is completely satisfactory. ‘Indonesia lobby’ leaves its users open to charges of being ‘anti-Indonesian’, and in any case does not capture the point that the lobby only supports a tiny elite within Indonesia. ‘Jakarta lobby’ is meant to address this shortcoming (see Fernandes, *Reluctant saviour*, p. 19.), but is hardly more precise.


252 McQueen, *Japan to the rescue*, p. 147.
Burke ultimately fails to do this, although he provides many insights into the ideological basis of Whitlam’s support for Suharto.\textsuperscript{253} He writes that under Whitlam the drive for a new national identity fused with much older – and more coercive – ways of thinking about security. The fate of the Timorese people hinged on how that security was interpreted and achieved.\textsuperscript{254}

The policy on Timor displayed

an essential continuity with the past – the rhetorical abandonment of racism and a new sensitivity to Asian aspirations was a mere gloss over a power politics \textit{structure} which had itself been violently achieved.\textsuperscript{255}

This is true enough. But what those who exercised power within this structure hoped to achieve remains a mystery. The discourse of security appears to be self-sufficient and impenetrable. Government policy seems incredible, ‘tearing asunder the already tenuous principle linking language with the world’, such that it can only be met with ‘disbelief’ by its critics.\textsuperscript{256} Occasional references to processes such as ‘the drive to accelerate the isomorphy of capital’\textsuperscript{257} do not redress this weakness.

Fernandes employs a more grounded approach.\textsuperscript{258} His explanation of the relation between the Jakarta lobby, the Australian state more broadly and Australian capitalism, is worth quoting at length:

the Jakarta lobby has not hijacked Australian policy; rather, it operates in harmony with it. There is a strategic convergence between its aims and the ‘national interest’ – unavoidable in capitalist economies – of guaranteeing political and economic control of the Indonesian archipelago… [successive governments supported Suharto] not because they were hypnotized or tricked by a Jakarta lobby, but because the Australian state and much of Australian capital had come to a carefully considered decision that support for the Indonesian military was the best course of action.\textsuperscript{259}


\textsuperscript{254} Burke, \textit{In fear of security}, p. 148.

\textsuperscript{255} Ibid., pp. 152-153. Emphasis in the original

\textsuperscript{256} Ibid., p. 141.

\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., p. 166.

\textsuperscript{258} Fernandes, \textit{Reluctant saviour}, pp. 21-25.

\textsuperscript{259} Ibid., p. 23.
But Fernandes’ formulation does not clarify the aims of Australian capitalism in supporting Suharto. Investment stability and access to labour and resources are certainly general concerns for the capitalist state, but as we have seen Indonesia is not particularly important to Australia in this respect. Politically and strategically, it cannot really be said that Australia ‘controls’ the Indonesian archipelago, and Fernandes’ argument that Australia desires ‘an Indonesia that is non-communist and integrated into the Western sphere of influence’ is outdated. Ultimately, Fernandes continues to fetishise specific aspects of Australia’s foreign policy, such as anti-communism or the relationship with Indonesia. This has important ramifications for his analysis of the events surrounding East Timor’s independence, as discussed in Chapters Four and Six.

What is missing from Fernandes’ account is a more substantial theory of imperialism. Such a theory was outlined in Chapter One. It was argued there that Australia finds itself inextricably part of a global imperialist system, that is, a system of generalised competition between major states, in which economic and strategic aspects are mutually dependent but irreducible. For Australia, the Indonesian archipelago, stretching from the Malay peninsula to the Southwest Pacific islands, is the most crucial region where this imperialist competition plays itself out.

This importance is not due to direct Australian economic interests in Indonesia, which are not substantial enough to warrant the angst of Australian policy makers over relations with one country. Australia’s vital trade routes to Northeast Asia do traverse the Indonesian archipelago. But in relations with Indonesia itself, even this appears as a strategic concern. East Timor is of even less economic importance to Australia. Several authors have argued that Australia’s desire for to access oil and gas resources in the Timor Sea were the prime motivation in supporting the Indonesian invasion. However, the documentary record does not reveal these interests to be a major concern, although they were noted from time to time. Nor is

260 Ibid., p. 22.
261 Ibid., p. 5.
there any intrinsic reason why an independent East Timor need interfere with these interests, as subsequent developments have shown (see Chapter Five). Nor is there any evidence that Australian or foreign oil corporations attempted to exert pressure over the issue. In this instance, the Australian state’s concern was primarily strategic, rather than directly economic. While subsequently the Australian state naturally attempted to derive maximum economic benefit from Indonesia’s occupation of East Timor, this was not what initially drove Australia’s support of the invasion.

Instead, Australia’s dominant concern in the Indonesian archipelago is strategic. Indonesia itself is no threat. But, as the realists argue, any great power threat to Australia must come through this region. Australian concern for ‘stability’ in and ‘good relations’ with Indonesia ultimately stem from the need to prevent hostile powers gaining a foothold from which they might threaten the Australian mainland or its lines of communications. At times of relative calm in the region, such as during the 1980s and 1990s, Australia’s security concerns can come to seem like paranoia. But Australian policy makers simply cannot dismiss the possibility that Australia will be drawn into a re-eruption of conflict between the major powers in Asia.

East Timor has been a particularly troubling aspect of this problem, both as a site of imperialist competition in itself, and because of its potential to destabilise the rest of the archipelago. The territory’s fate during World War Two is a clear example of how a situation of generalised imperialist conflict means that mutual strategic fears can become self-fulfilling. East Timor was not invaded because of any actual strategic importance, but only the mutual perception of such importance. Yet both Australia and Japan acted logically given the assumption that they were part of a system of unlimited state competition. It is not surprising that the Japanese reluctance to offend Portugal was discounted by Australia, given the latter’s (mistaken) assumption that Japan was determined to invade Australia itself. But according to this same logic, Japan too had no choice other than to invade themselves.  

The same logic resulted in Australian support for the Suharto regime, including its invasion of East Timor. Rather than cowardly appeasement, it was a rational tactic in

---


264 As Frei discusses, the logic and motivations of the two countries were remarkably similar. Frei, ‘Japan’s reluctant decision,’ pp. 299-300.
the defence of Australia’s imperialist interests.\textsuperscript{265} This is not to endorse a policy which was not only morally indefensible, but which was not of benefit to the majority of people in Australia. It is simply to recognise that judged by its own imperialist logic, which assumes such conflicts are unavoidable, the policy proved reasonably successful for over thirty years. Popular opposition in both Australia and East Timor was certainly an irritant after 1975, but this did not lessen the gains made from the geo-strategic point of view. Finally, it is important to note that because ‘the relationship’ is a specific tactic, rather than an end in itself, Australia could modify its position when Suharto ceased to be a reliable ally. This had significant ramifications for Australian policy on East Timor in 1999, as the previous tactic of support for Indonesia’s occupation was abandoned in favour of an Australian intervention designed to manage the transition of East Timor to independence, without abandoning the underlying goals of the original policy. This argument will be elaborated in the following chapters.

Chapter Three

Indonesia’s reformasi and the independence of East Timor

Although the East Timorese resistance movement managed to gain increased international legitimacy in the mid-1990s, there seemed little chance that their homeland would achieve independence in the near future. While the New Order dictatorship remained, so would Indonesian rule over the ‘27th province’, and in March 1998 Suharto was made president for yet another five years. But in May 1998 a mass movement for democratic change forced Suharto to resign. Thirty years worth of frustrated political grievances burst into the open, not least the East Timor question. This chapter charts the process by which Indonesia’s democratisation led to East Timor’s independence. It concludes by discussing what the Indonesian military hoped to gain by their campaign of violence and physical destruction in the territory. An understanding of these developments is crucial for evaluating Australia’s motivations for its subsequent intervention in East Timor.

1. Indonesia 1997-1998: ‘All that is solid melts into air’¹

_The Asian economic crisis hits Indonesia_

The radical political transformation of 1997-1998 resulted to a significant degree from the most profound economic crisis in Indonesia since the start of the New Order. After 30 years of sustained economic growth, the economy went into reverse, recording a 13.1% decrease in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1998,² with inflation of 65%.³ By March of that year, around 50 million people were without sufficient employment, doubling the number of Indonesians living below the official

---

poverty line. In a country with no real social security net, mass starvation became a real possibility, resulting in widespread riots and looting which left thousands dead.

The social and political impact of this economic collapse was increased by its sudden and unexpected arrival. After Indonesia’s near bankruptcy during the Sukarno years, Suharto had overseen 30 years of relative stability, in which genuine advances were made in the standard of living for most people. In the early 1990s Indonesia had enjoyed steady if not dramatic economic expansion (see Table 3.1). Although there were growing concerns about the distorting effects of corruption and nepotism, Indonesia continued to be hailed as part of the East Asian economic miracle by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Even during the first half of 1997 Indonesia’s economic performance seemed normal, and there were no predictions of the carnage to come in the following months. A World Bank report published as late as September 1997 stated that while Southeast Asian economies faced some structural problems, ‘a full-blown Mexico-style crisis appears unlikely because of better economic fundamentals’, and overall growth was predicted to slow only slightly.

Table 3.1: Yearly change in Indonesian Gross Domestic Product, 1990-1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% change in GDP</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>-13.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on constant prices, year 2000 base.

Beginning as a financial crisis, the Indonesian economy went into reverse between June 1997 and the end of 1998. The immediate cause was a financial crisis in Thailand, which was hit by currency speculation in May 1997. The government was forced to devalue the baht in early July, and the currency lost 60% of its value in three months. This led world financial markets to reassess investments throughout the region, resulting in widespread currency devaluation (see Table 3.2). By early September, the Malaysian ringgit had lost 20% of its value. In the four days from

---

5 For an enthusiastic account, see Hill, *The Indonesian economy*, p. 274.
7 *World economic outlook database*. 
October 20th 1997, the Hong Kong stock exchange lost 23% of its value. With its financial system in chaos, nine of Korea’s 30 largest business groups collapsed. It was, as Garran has stressed, the end of the so-called ‘Asian miracle’.

Table 3.2: Value of East Asian currencies against the US dollar, 1997-1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>93.4</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td>61.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>96.8</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>66.5</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>65.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>95.1</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>63.0</td>
<td>60.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

January 1997 = 100. Value is average over the month.

Despite the lack of direct economic links with Thailand, Indonesia was the country hardest hit by the financial ‘contagion’, as events in Thailand triggered rising region-wide risk perceptions, and an ensuing flight of capital out of neighbours’ currencies and countries, the more so in countries such as Indonesia with broadly similar economic structures and commercial climates.

This was manifested in a blow-out of Indonesia’s capital account, as the country’s capital inflow of US$12.7 billion in 1996-1997 turned into an outflow of US$4 billion in 1997-1998.

The government responded by tightening fiscal and monetary policy, augmenting the economic downturn. Having spent US$1.5 billion vainly defending the currency, the government was forced to allow the rupiah to fully float from August 14th. The exchange rate fell from 2,450 rupiahs per US dollar at the end of June, to 2,700 on July 21st, and 3,545 by October 6th, which prompted panic buying of the dollar.

Further devaluation saw the currency trade at between 7,000 to 10,000 rupiahs per US dollar in early to mid January 1998.

---

8 For a general account of the regional crisis, see Garran, Tigers tamed.
10 Hill, The Indonesian economy, p. 274.
11 Garran, Tigers tamed, p. 147; van Dijk, A country in despair, pp. 71-72, 95.
12 Garran, Tigers tamed, p. 145-146; van Dijk, A country in despair, pp. 71-72.
Indonesian stock market lost 45% of its value, and it remained stagnant throughout 1998.\textsuperscript{13}

However dramatic, the financial collapse was merely an expression of deeper economic problems in Indonesia, and indeed throughout East Asia. As Krugman’s well known analysis pointed out several years before the crash, growth rates in East Asia were largely based on non-repeatable increases in capital and labour inputs, and conventional wisdom which saw Asian countries as embodying a miraculous new economic paradigm was dangerously misplaced.\textsuperscript{14} Nonetheless, during the 1980s and 1990s, foreign investment soared throughout the region, fuelling an annual average increase in investment of 20% in the latter decade. The result was over-production of key exports such as electronic goods. A surplus of funds also spilt over into speculative investment. Eventually, falling prices for exports to the West, declining profit rates, rising labour costs and a worsening balance of payments position led to financial markets re-evaluating their exposure to the region. As investors rushed for the door, the region’s currencies collapsed.\textsuperscript{15}

In Indonesia, much foreign investment had taken the form of short term private debt. The World Bank estimated that private debt in Indonesia increased from US$35 billion in 1994 to US$65 billion in mid 1997.\textsuperscript{16} The Indonesian economy was unable to productively employ such masses of capital, resulting in speculative investment. Speculation was further encouraged by government policies which had prevented the devaluation of the Indonesian rupiah against the US dollar, and by a lack of banking controls and the corruption of Suharto’s coterie.\textsuperscript{17} Dozens of private banks were set up in Indonesia after the sector was deregulated in 1988, often with inadequate reserves or prudential oversight. In November 1997 the government closed 16 banks which were in a precarious financial position, leading to general panic amongst all bank customers.\textsuperscript{18} The burst in the speculative bubble, however, quickly spilled over into the real economy. Even companies founded on productive investments became unprofitable, as the collapse of the rupiah confronted them with the soaring cost of

\textsuperscript{13} Hill, \textit{The Indonesian economy}, p. 269.
\textsuperscript{14} Paul Krugman, ‘The myth of Asia’s miracle,’ \textit{Foreign Affairs} 73, no. 6 (1994).
\textsuperscript{16} Garran, \textit{Tigers tamed}, p. 142-143.
\textsuperscript{17} Hill, \textit{The Indonesian economy}, pp. 277-278.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 280.
servicing US dollar denominated debts at the same time as domestic demand collapsed.

The cost of the economic crisis was not, however, born by the financial speculators but by the mass of the Indonesian people. Tens of thousands of businesses went bankrupt. It is estimated that 12,000 closed in Jakarta alone, 40% of the registered total.\textsuperscript{19} Those which survived cut production drastically. Tens of millions of workers became unemployed. An official estimate in early 1998 put the proportion of unemployed or under-employed workers at over half the labour force.\textsuperscript{20} The real wages of those who retained their jobs fell dramatically. Conditions became desperate as well for the urban poor, small business people and farmers, as prices spiraled, particularly for imported food and medicines. By 1998, perhaps 50 million Indonesians were living below the official poverty line, up from 22.5 million in 1996.\textsuperscript{21} This impoverishment was concentrated on the island of Java, as farmers elsewhere suffered far less because of increased agricultural exports due to the fall in the exchange rate.\textsuperscript{22} A conservative estimate puts the decline in household income for a rice farmer living on Java itself at between 30-50% during 1998, with even worse results for urban workers.\textsuperscript{23} With prices of basic foodstuffs such as rice and cooking oil doubling or tripling, malnutrition became a serious problem in Indonesia’s major cities.\textsuperscript{24} Such a situation inevitably led to political unrest, and serious riots broke out in Jakarta and other cities from early January 1998.\textsuperscript{25}

\textit{International reaction to the crisis}

The scale of the East Asian economic crisis threatened to destabilise the entire world economy, prompting a series of interventions in the affected countries under the auspices of the IMF. At that time and since, however, the IMF’s interventions have been harshly criticised. This is particularly so in the case of Indonesia, where the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} van Dijk, \textit{A country in despair}, pp. 290-291.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Estimates of unemployment vary considerably. The figure quoted was agreed upon by the Ministry of Labour and labour unions in March 1998. It is based on a labour force of 91 million, 13.5 million unemployed and another 35.1 million ‘disguised’ unemployed, the latter swollen by buskers, street hawkers et cetera, given the absence of a social security system. See Ibid., p. 113. For an estimate of unemployment of 20% at the peak of the crisis, see Hill, \textit{The Indonesian economy}, p. 271.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Garran, \textit{Tigers tamed}.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Hill, \textit{The Indonesian economy}, p. 271.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{24} van Dijk, \textit{A country in despair}, pp. 111-112.
\end{itemize}
IMF’s ambitious plans to reform the economy actually deepened the crisis and, in particular, cut into the living standards of ordinary Indonesians.

The Indonesian government invited IMF intervention on October 8th 1997, as it became clear foreign funds would be needed to stabilise the economy. On October 30th, in conjunction with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the IMF provided US$23 billion in emergency funding, with a further US$20 billion in bilateral funding. Liquidity was poured into the banking sector to prevent a general collapse, although this fuelled inflation and further undermined the value of the rupiah. Moreover, IMF aid came with stringent conditions attached. The banking sector would have to be restructured, government subsidies on basic goods were to be removed along with monopolies and cartels, and foreign competition would have to be granted greater access to the Indonesian market. Further assistance would be dependent on progress in these areas. But these measures directly challenged the entrenched political and economic power of Suharto, his family, and the elite group of business leaders who benefited from state favour and hence supported Suharto’s rule. As van Dijk argues, the reforms directly touched the interests of the most powerful businessmen and women in Indonesia, the so-called ‘conglomerates’, who headed immense business concerns, holding the majority of shares in banks and a diversity of companies, or who had spread their capital over a great many firms. It was not at all clear that Suharto could implement IMF reforms without undermining his own position, a difficulty which increased as the reform measures seemingly failed to restore confidence in Indonesia’s economy. Yet he could not do without foreign assistance. As a result Soeharto oscillated between ready agreement to the IMF’s demands and repudiation of critical details. Critics in Indonesia and the West accused the IMF of imposing excessively harsh demands on Indonesia with the covert goal of unseating Soeharto.

The budget of January 6th 1998 was based on a valuation of the rupiah nearly twice its market price, and failed to implement cuts to fuel and food subsidies demanded by the IMF. The result was a new run on the rupiah, and panicked food riots among

---

26 Garran, Tigers tamed, p. 144; van Dijk, A country in despair, p. 82.  
27 van Dijk, A country in despair, pp. 73-74.  
28 Garran, Tigers tamed, p. 139.
Jakarta’s poor. On January 15th, a new IMF package was agreed to by Suharto which promised to dismantle monopolies, cut taxes and reduce state subsidies. As a ‘concession’ to the need for social spending, the IMF allowed a deficit of one per cent in the new budget announced on January 23rd. These measures failed to inspire confidence, with the rupiah falling to a new low of 15,000 per US dollar.\(^{29}\)

It was not only Suharto and his cronies who stood to lose from IMF conditionality. The IMF approach was driven by an almost fanatical aversion to any deficit spending by the government in order to boost the economy, resulting in cuts to subsidies on basic foodstuffs, fertilizer and fuel, and price rises for services such as electricity and public transport. Such measures further undermined the income and spending of Indonesian people, both lowering real incomes and deepening the recession.

Criticism of the IMF approach came not only from within Indonesia, but also from the Australian government, which actively lobbied for less stringent conditionality on financial assistance.\(^{30}\) Both at the time and subsequently, the IMF has been roundly criticised by academics and commentators.\(^{31}\)

The IMF’s bungled response to the crisis was not simply a result of incompetence or neo-liberal zeal for the free market, and not merely a response to Indonesia’s immediate economic problems. It was an attempt to entirely reshape Indonesia’s economy in line with the requirements of Japanese and American capital. Despite his impressive economic record, Suharto’s regime came under increasing pressure during the mid-1990s over the distorting influence on the economy of corruption, nepotism and state-granted monopolies. Such indiscretions had been excused during the Cold War due to Suharto’s firm anti-Communist stance. Indeed, they had financed the repressive state apparatus so valued by the Western powers. But in the

---

\(^{29}\) Ibid., pp. 146-147; van Dijk, *A country in despair*, pp. 95-96.


1990s Indonesia’s strategic importance declined somewhat, and corruption came to be seen as destabilising, as well as hurting the interests of US, European and Japanese investors. The criticisms were increasingly echoed within Indonesia by members of the middle class excluded from the political and economic privileges afforded to Suharto’s chosen associates, and whose own ambitions were frustrated by corruption and nepotism. From the mid-1990s influential Western media started bracketing Suharto with figures such as North Korea’s Kim, which, as Tanter argues, indicated that time was running out for the Indonesian dictator. By the time of the financial crisis, criticism of human rights abuses and lack of democracy were commonly used as issues with which to pressure the Suharto regime, and the US government was building links with Indonesian opposition groups.

At the same time, however, the Western powers could not openly attempt to force Suharto out of power, which would have been dangerously destabilising. The economic crisis resolved this impasse, precipitating a showdown with Indonesia’s entrenched political elite. Rather than simply addressing Indonesia’s immediate fiscal difficulties, the IMF tried to entirely restructure Indonesia’s state/market interactions, which inevitably brought conflict with Suharto’s political interests. As Hill argues

[The IMF] appears to have taken the decision early on that this was the opportunity it had long been waiting for, to push through practically every conceivable item on its Indonesian reform agenda.

Whether the IMF actually desired or worked towards Suharto’s downfall from the beginning of its intervention remains an open question. But as the crisis deepened,
the issue of political reform came to be seen as an intrinsic part of economic recovery, both internationally and within Indonesia, often under the label of ending ‘cronyism’.\textsuperscript{38} Just a few weeks before Suharto’s fall, IMF managing director Michael Camdessus stated that

Democracy and effective economics are sisters... Some people say for rapid development you need a good, quiet dictatorship... but these are not the old days. That is not the new Asia.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{The fall of Suharto}

Domestically, the economic crisis removed a major ideological justification for Suharto’s regime. Whatever the New Order’s political crimes (and there were many), the regime’s supporters could always point to the economic advances made in the country, and the benefits this had brought to the people, no matter how unevenly distributed. This allowed Suharto to maintain support not just among his immediate coterie, but also from the Indonesian upper and middle classes more broadly, and from the security forces. There was a period of political unrest in 1996-1997, focused on the removal of Megawati Sukarnoputri from the leadership of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI).\textsuperscript{40} Then, prompted by the elections to the People’s Consultative Assembly in May 1997, discussions had begun about the transition to the post-Suharto era, given the President’s age and uncertain health. For the first time there was public debate over whether Suharto should nominate for another term. But


in reality there was no question of a serious challenge to his position once he declared he would remain president until 2003.\footnote{41}{van Dijk, \textit{A country in despair}, pp. 51ff.}

Now, however, Suharto appeared to be a major barrier to economic recovery. Calls for serious reform came from all sectors of society as the economic crisis worsened early in 1998. Commentators and political parties, including the ruling Golkar, began discussing the need, for example, to end state-sponsored monopolies. The influential All Indonesia League of Muslim Intellectuals urged greater democracy and transparency in society. Increasingly, demands for economic and political reforms were indistinguishable, as corruption and nepotism became the key issues.\footnote{42}{Ibid., pp. 98ff. For Indonesian commentary of this sort shortly before Suharto’s fall, see ‘Calls for Soeharto’s resignation mount,’ \textit{The Jakarta Post}, 18 May 1998, p. 1; ‘Permintaan DPR demi perbaikan ekonomi,’ \textit{Kompas}, 19 May 1998, p. 9; ‘Pimpinan DPR: Sebaiknya Pak Harto Mundur,’ \textit{Kompas}, 19 May 1998, p. 1; ‘Reformasi politik dan economi harus bersamaan,’ \textit{Republika}, 24 April 1998, p. 1; Victor Silaen, ‘Reformasi total untuk demokrasi,’ \textit{Merdeka}, 14 May 1998, p. 4.}

As Hill argues, it was becoming apparent that the Suharto regime was incapable of acting decisively to restore confidence in the economy:

\begin{quote}
It was not simply a matter of an apparently insatiably greedy first family, but also a political system which had lost its capacity to act decisively in a crisis, and thereby lacked credibility in the eyes of both domestic and foreign investors.\footnote{43}{Hill, \textit{The Indonesian economy}, p. 282.}
\end{quote}

And yet the central question of Suharto’s rule remained unaddressed within the country’s formal political structures. Golkar remained firmly behind their figurehead, although jockeying to be his successor began behind the scenes. More importantly, none of the major opposition party leaders was prepared to definitively place themselves at the head of a drive to replace the Suharto regime. Megawati Sukarnoputri, who amongst oppositionists had the largest popular base in the form of the PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), declared in January 1998 that she was prepared to replace Suharto, but carefully avoided encouraging popular action against him, and kept a relatively low profile until May. Amien Rais, who founded the modernist Muslim party PAN (National Mandate Party) in August 1998, argued from December 1997 that Suharto should not be re-elected, but discounted
himself as a presidential candidate, and, like Megawati, did not call for actual resistance to the government.\(^4^4\)

Instead, the decisive role in Suharto’s downfall was played by millions of Indonesian students, workers and urban poor, who took to the streets to oust Suharto and protest against their impoverishment. In late 1997, small numbers of students had begun protesting against rising prices and demanding political reform. These protests rapidly increased in size from early May after Suharto’s announcement that there was no chance of political reform before his presidential term expired in 2003. This was totally unacceptable to student groups, whose demand for reformasi (reform), while vague on details, had a lowest common denominator of Suharto’s removal. Moreover, on May 12\(^{th}\) several students were shot dead by security forces at Trisakti University in Jakarta. The following day fresh demonstrations were mounted to denounce the killing, drawing the public support of opposition politicians for the first time. Several regional parliaments were occupied, as were radio stations which were then used to broadcast anti-Suharto material.\(^4^5\)

At the same time, the government announced on May 4\(^{th}\) that from the following day subsidies on fuel and electricity would be removed due to IMF strictures. Totally unexpected, the announcement was the last straw for a population in desperate financial troubles. Starting on May 13\(^{th}\), there were days of riots and looting in Jakarta and other cities including Solo (Surakarta).\(^4^6\) Along with symbols of the Suharto regime, ethnic Chinese were particular targets, including brutal gang rapes of Chinese women and girls. Perhaps as many as a thousand people died around the country, mainly looters trapped in burning shops and malls. There was an estimated US$250 million worth of property damage in Jakarta alone.


But along with the chaos and destruction, the reform movement made a vital political breakthrough. For the first time, not just students but masses of workers and urban poor demonstrated against the regime. This in turn further emboldened students to protest on the streets, whereas previously there had been an uneasy truce with security forces, providing protests were restricted to the campuses. Pressure on Suharto redoubled, and now he faced open dissent even from within Golkar. When students moved to occupy the People’s Congress building on May 17th, security forces did not attempt to stop them. In the coming days, the chairman of the People’s Congress as well as the leaders of the parties’ parliamentary groups called for Suharto’s resignation, although the intended timing was unclear. Suharto responded by promising fresh elections. Unimpressed, students occupied the People’s Congress in still greater numbers and prevented elected members from leaving, attempting to force a special session which could remove Suharto.47

Further demonstrations were planned in many cities for May 20th. Seeming to finally provide a focal point for discontent, Amien Rais endorsed and put himself at the head of the protests. However, Rais then proceeded to call off the Jakarta demonstration, citing fears of repression from security forces. Elsewhere, massive demonstrations demanded Suharto’s removal, including one million protestors in Jogjakarta. Golkar officials and military chief Wiranto withdrew their support for Suharto, and he was unable to find people willing to serve in a new cabinet. Facing the threat of a military coup, the dictator resigned on May 21st, bringing to an end a 30 year regime of political repression.48

Habibie holds on

Yet even before the euphoria of Suharto’s removal had faded, there was a sharp division over the attitude to take towards Vice-President Habibie, who now inherited power. The more radical section of the student movement demanded reformasi total, a demand which was no less vague than the earlier simple reformasi, but which rejected Habibie simply taking over where Suharto had left off. Others, however,

thought the removal of Suharto was enough, sparking furious debate within the occupied People’s Congress, which very nearly came to violence when pro-Habibie youth entered the building on May 22nd. The decisive factor in Habibie’s survival was the failure of opposition leaders to press for his immediate removal. Soon after Suharto fell, Megawati called on those who had pushed him not to continue on with their efforts, but rather to ‘show compassion and stop battering fallen president Suharto’. Crucially, Amien Rais gave cautious support to Habibie, arguing that the ‘good Muslim’ deserved a chance to prove himself. These middle class leaders were afraid to fully unleash the unpredictable power of a mass democracy movement of workers and students, even if they stood to gain the presidency as a result. As Rais had said back in February, ‘Mobilising people is easy, but controlling them is difficult.’

Nonetheless, some student reformers continued to mobilise. Although reduced from their previous size and intensity, protests demanded that Habibie step down and the military give up its political functions, that Suharto be put on trial, and that the fortunes of he and his family be used to alleviate poverty. There were also continued demonstrations against rising prices and food shortages, as inflation reached 69% in August and the numbers of people living in poverty continued to climb. The second round of protests reached their peak between November 12th and 14th, coinciding with the extraordinary session of the People’s Congress, when perhaps 100,000 rallied in opposition to Habibie. However, there was to be no repeat occupation of the parliament building. The security forces were determined to remain in control of the situation, and had organised thousands of Islamic youth, unemployed people and farmers to be brought to the capital to serve as an armed force against protestors. Running battles broke out around the city as student protestors and local residents clashed with the police and their militia allies, leading

---

50 Fermont, ‘Indonesia: The inferno of revolution,’ p. 29.
to as many as 19 deaths. Meanwhile, the People’s Congress made some modest political reforms and scheduled elections for June the next year. 53

With stalemate on the streets and in the parliament, Habibie remained in power more through the inertia of others rather than his own actions. A surprise appointment to the vice-presidency in March 1998, he had no independent power base, and had never been considered a contender for post-Suharto power. Indeed, he owed his position to a Suharto manoeuvre designed to forestall discussion of political successors. Without real support from either the military or Golkar on the one side, or oppositional groups on the other, many thought Habibie would not survive in power more than a few months. 54

But he proved more durable than expected. Although a major beneficiary of New Order nepotism, Habibie recast himself as a reformer. Immediately after he became president he ordered the release of many political prisoners, including from East Timor, and relaxed restrictions on freedoms of the press and association, including the formation of labour unions. Habibie also began to implement economic reforms as demanded by the IMF, making some progress in combating corruption and nepotism and reforming the banking sector. 55

Habibie had little choice in the matter. Domestic pressure for reforms simply could not be ignored, and the old methods of outright oppression could not be used. Democracy activists report a euphoric atmosphere in which demonstrations were a daily occurrence, and the security forces seemed temporarily incapable of action due to a crisis of confidence and internal conflicts. 56 By now support for reformasi was so all-pervasive that it could be used as a catchword in advertisements. 57 At the same time, continued foreign financial support was dependent on at least a modicum of

---

53 Students did breach security at the parliament building, but only after the session had ended, and they soon left voluntarily. Lane, Unfinished nation, p. 181-188; van Dijk, A country in despair, pp. 341-355.
55 van Dijk, A country in despair, pp. 214-216, 259-266, 399-423.
56 Interview with Dhyta Caturani and Reiner, 14.02.2007, Jakarta; Interview with Hilmar Farid, 08.02.2007, Jakarta; Interview with Meggy Margiyono, 05.02.2007, Jakarta; Interview with Nur Widi, 21.02.2007, Jogjakarta; Interview with Wilson, 13.02.07, Jakarta.
57 van Dijk, A country in despair, p. 209.
reform measures, and the government increasingly relied on foreign aid for its routine expenditure.\textsuperscript{58}

Perhaps Habibie even hoped that a reform program might create a popular support base for himself. But if Megawati and Amien Rais were reluctant to unambiguously support political reform, Habibie was even less able to align himself with the democracy movement. Ultimately, given the manner in which he had attained the position of president, Habibie remained beholden to the remains of the Suharto regime, and was unable to grant any of the students’ key demands. His own ministers and even the Attorney-General, supposedly responsible for ending corruption, were themselves alleged to be thoroughly corrupt. Refusing to bring Suharto or his family to a speedy trial, or to confiscate their ill-gotten fortunes, Habibie preferred to bestow on his former mentor a US$2 million mansion, as the ‘entitlement’ of an ex-president.\textsuperscript{59}

The key limitation to the success of the reform movement was that it left unchallenged the power of the security forces. While their public image had been seriously tainted by their repression of student protestors, the police and military remained essentially a law unto themselves. In fact, high ranking officers, either military chief General Wiranto or Kopassus (special forces) commander Major-General Prabowo Subianto (Suharto’s son in law), are widely considered to have orchestrated much of the anti-Chinese looting and violence during May, either to destabilise Suharto or to justify military intervention during the crisis, depending on who is considered responsible. Habibie’s position in relation to the military was far weaker than his predecessor’s, a fact highlighted when Major General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono refused to replace Wiranto as armed forces chief in November 1998, and when Wiranto flat out refused Habibie’s request for him to resign early in 1999.\textsuperscript{60} Habibie’s simultaneous need to introduce reforms, combined with a lack of control over the military, would have disastrous consequences in East Timor.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 296.


\textsuperscript{60} Damien Kingsbury, ‘The TNI and the militias,’ in \textit{Guns and ballot boxes: East Timor’s vote for independence}, ed. Damien Kingsbury, Victoria, Monash Asia Institute, 2000, pp. 69-70; van Dijk, \textit{A country in despair}, pp. 236-238.
2. Reformasi and self-determination in East Timor

Outside of Java, the most important ramification of the economic crisis was a resurgence of secessionist feeling among a number of reluctant Indonesian provinces. Most notable were events in East Timor, however there was also unrest in Kalimantan, Ambon, Aceh and West Papua. As Kingsbury writes

> It seemed increasingly clear during the post-New Order period that this heterogeneous state had only been kept together through the use of repression, which reflected strong central rule. Once strong central rule was no longer a given, the periphery appeared to begin to fragment…

Popular resistance in East Timor

It was immediately obvious to pro-independence forces in East Timor that the political unrest in Jakarta provided an opening for them to press their specific claims. The first response was a return to offensive military operations by Falintil (Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor), which had been reduced to merely surviving during recent years. From April 1998, they launched a series of raids, perhaps most daringly at Alas in November, in which they pre-empted a planned massacre of young men in the town. Three Indonesian soldiers were killed and another 13 taken prisoner, and rifles stockpiled for the massacre were captured. Such raids resulted in the standard Indonesian reprisals. Although not in danger of being defeated militarily by Falintil, the renewed fighting underlined that in 25 years Indonesia had been unable to crush the East Timorese resistance, and that remaining in the territory would continue to be expensive, both financially and in lives lost.

However, the renewal of military attacks was far less important than an upsurge of civil political struggle, validating Gusmão’s 1990s strategy of building up an underground urban political front, rather than focusing exclusively on guerilla military struggle. After Suharto’s resignation, first students and then other political activists and parties became increasingly bold in their activism. The result was a series of major demonstrations in Dili in June and July calling for a referendum on independence, which were organised by the East Timor Student Solidarity Council.

---

(ETSSC), a non-party affiliated body created in early June to co-ordinate activists from the University of East Timor. In September, the protests grew into a general strike in favour of independence, with the civil service shut down and pro-independence youths maintaining roadblocks in and out of urban centres. Similar events were repeated in December. The broad-based civil struggle demonstrated the rejection of Indonesian rule by the overwhelming majority of the population. Independence also began to be favoured by some large East Timorese landowners who had previously supported integration, as their hopes that ties with Indonesia would provide economic benefits disappeared. Previous supporters of integration with Indonesia within the bureaucracy and civil society also increasingly came to support independence. Bereft of any significant support base, Indonesia’s position in East Timor was increasingly untenable.

This seemed to be recognised by the Indonesian security forces. The political self-confidence of Indonesia’s military elites were battered by the events of May 1998 in Jakarta, making them less able or less willing to directly repress independence sentiment in East Timor. Economic and political upheavals also had an impact on rank and file Indonesian troops, undermining morale and raising questions about their role in East Timor. Many soldiers in East Timor went without pay for months, and some units traded news of political developments in Jakarta with their Falintil foes via VHF radio, contact which sometimes developed into locally arranged ceasefires by 1999. In a dramatic reversal of their stance before Suharto’s fall, the military failed to crush public demonstrations, and independence groups were largely


64 Interview with Faried Cahyono, 21.02.2007, Jogjakarta; Interview with Hilmar Farid.


66 Pro-independence activists in East Timor at the time confirm the military’s inability to openly silence dissent; Interview with Hilmar Farid; Interview with Joaquim Fonseca, 22.11.2007, Dili; Interview with Nuno Rodriguez, 10.11.2007, Dili; Interview with Wilson.

able to operate above ground as regular political parties.\textsuperscript{68} The less repressive climate was reflected in Dili’s newspaper, \textit{Suara Timor Timur}, which began to carry open discussion of the aims of the independence movement, including interviews with Xanana Gusmão and other leaders.\textsuperscript{69} As one pro-independence activist describes it, ‘the situation was very much alive, and people would take any risk for independence.’\textsuperscript{70}

However, in East Timor as elsewhere, the military was subdued rather than actually disempowered. Their response from mid-1998 to the growing independence agitation was to organise pro-integration militia who could act as their proxies. According to Lansell Taudevin, a long term resident in East Timor, ‘What was becoming apparent was the dominance of pro-independence feeling. This realisation also exacted an increase in subversive activity by the military.’\textsuperscript{71}

This represented a return to the tactics of the early years of the occupation, with Indonesia promoting a myth that violence was due to internal conflict among the Timorese.\textsuperscript{72} But this actually indicated the weakness of the military, who felt they could no longer so openly engage in violent repression. Moreover, having enjoyed a period of relative freedom, urban independence supporters were unusually defiant, organising to defend themselves in their stronghold of Dili.\textsuperscript{73} Echoes from Jakarta’s economic and political turmoil were reverberating in East Timor. Amplified in the political space which had opened up after years of brutal suppression, the resulting cacophony of independence protest and security force counter-mobilisation could not dissipate short of a final confrontation over East Timor’s status within Indonesia.

\textit{What do we want? Self-determination! When do we want it? Eventually!}

While pro-independence activists mobilised at street level, moves were also underway to put forward a political platform to suit the new situation. In June 1998, an unprecedented public conference was convened in Dili by the ETSSC, which

\textsuperscript{68} Martinkus, \textit{A dirty little war}, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{70} Interview with Joaquim Fonseca.
\textsuperscript{71} Taudevin, \textit{East Timor: Too little too late}, p. 141.
\textsuperscript{72} I owe this point to Joaquim Fonseca.
\textsuperscript{73} Martinkus, \textit{A dirty little war}, p. 146.
gathered leading activists and community leaders from across East Timor. More of a
political rally than any sort of decision-making body, the conference rejected the idea
of autonomy under Indonesia and reaffirmed demands for full independence, to be
achieved via a referendum secured by United Nations (UN) peacekeepers. The
conference also demanded the release of Xanana Gusmão and other political
prisoners, the removal of ABRI (Indonesian Armed Forces and Police) from East
Timor, and a joint Indonesian/Portuguese administration until independence. While
such demands were not new, that they could now be realistically advanced as a
program for immediate political agitation indicated just how much the situation had
changed. Public meetings advancing the platform were held in Dili and elsewhere. 74

Meanwhile, there was a major shift in negotiations between Portugal and Indonesia,
held under UN auspices. After years of stagnation due to Indonesia’s refusal to even
consider East Timor as anything other than an integral part of its territory, Jakarta
now gave some ground, allowing discussion on proposals for regional ‘autonomy’.
This drew an angry response from the East Timorese leadership, for whom
independence was a non-negotiable issue. As such, they continued to demand an
internationally acceptable act of self-determination. How this might come about,
however, was a matter of contention. Gusmão, from his exile under house arrest in
Jakarta, outlined a plan which called for one or two years of ‘confidence building’,
during which time Indonesia’s military presence would be wound back, followed by
a full five to 10 years of ‘autonomy’. Only then would East Timorese society be
ready to take on the burden of full independence. Joao Carrascalão, leader of the
UDT (East Timorese Democratic) party, José Ramos-Horta and Bishop Belo also
embraced such a time frame. 75

For many rank and file activists among the East Timorese youth, as well as Falintil,
such a long time frame was unacceptable. They considered that East Timor had been
an independent nation, no matter how briefly, and did not need a long period under
Indonesian or UN tutelage to teach them how to manage their own affairs. Gusmão
did not seem to share their confidence. The leadership in exile were also anxious to

74 ‘Ribuan mahasiswa gelar mimbar bebas,’ Suara Timor Timur, 11 June 1998, p. 1; Taudevin, East
Timor: Too little too late, pp. 147-150.
75 Harold Crouch, ‘The TNI and East Timor policy,’ in Out of the ashes: Destruction and
reconstruction of East Timor, ed. James Fox and Dionisio Babo Soares, Canberra, ANU E Press,
2003, pp. 146-147; Greenlees and Garran, Deliverance, pp. 46-47; Hikam, ‘Democracy in Indonesia
and East Timor,’ p. 81; Taudevin, East Timor: Too little too late, pp. 171-175.
avoid alienating vital international support for the East Timorese cause. Gusmão and Ramos-Horta were, for example, keen to stress that an independent East Timor would be untainted by Marxism and would fit itself into the prevailing regional order. Their cautious approach to the timing of self-determination was in keeping with the plans of Australia, as Prime Minister Howard communicated to Habibie in December 1998.

**Competing domestic pressures**

Ultimately though, a series of pressures forced Habibie to resolve the situation much more quickly than envisaged in the cautious approaches of the East Timorese leadership or Australia. The first was blunt economic reality. East Timor was a huge financial burden. One estimate puts the cost of the occupation at US$1 million per day in 1998. Poverty ridden East Timor hardly seemed worth such expense. Despite disproportionate spending in the region over the past 25 years, Jakarta’s priorities had been strategic, especially the construction of roads for military access, not economic development. The limited profits which were generated by East Timorese industry, particularly coffee production, were appropriated by a small group of military officers, and the region was therefore an unmitigated drain on the state budget. Given the renewed military and civil resistance to Indonesian rule, there seemed no end in sight to this situation. East Timor thus represented an intolerable burden at a time when the Indonesian budget was dependent on foreign economic aid.

There was also increasing domestic support for a lasting settlement in East Timor. The province’s struggle for independence was not a major political issue in the rest of Indonesia before the fall of Suharto. The media only began to report on problems in East Timor after the Santa Cruz massacre, and even then the issue was widely seen as one of international perception or of abuses by the military, rather than a fundamental rejection of Indonesia by the East Timorese. As Crouch argues

---

76 For example see Jose ‘Xanana’ Gusmao, ‘Reconciliation, unity and national development in the framework of the transition towards independence,’ in Guns and ballot boxes: East Timor’s vote for independence, ed. Damien Kingsbury, Victoria, Monash Asia Institute, 2000, pp. 1-9; José Romos Horta, ‘Self-determination for East Timor: Implications for the region,’ *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 51, no. 1 (1997), pp. 97-102. Gusmão’s speech, delivered a few days before the ballot in August, seems intended as much for an international as a domestic audience.

77 Taylor, *The price of freedom*, p. 16.
Even pro-democracy activists often seemed to believe that the key problem was to democratise Indonesia itself and then the East Timorese would be happy to remain with Indonesia.\footnote{Crouch, ‘The TNI and East Timor policy,’ pp. 142-143.}

However, after the Santa Cruz massacre support for East Timorese self-determination had grown among more radical sections of the democracy movement. In particular, the socialist Peoples’ Democratic Party (PRD), and its predecessor organisations, established links with East Timorese student groups. This resulted in the first joint political actions between East Timorese and Indonesian activists, notably the occupation of several foreign embassies, including during the 1994 APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit held in Jakarta. Such joint actions received the blessing of Xanana Gusmão as he shifted the Timorese strategy to one of civil political activism. The other major focus for Indonesian activists was to promote the issue of East Timorese self-determination amongst the wider democracy movement.\footnote{Interview with Dhyta Caturani and Reiner; Interview with Oscar da Silva, 14.11.2007, Dili; Interview with Meggy Margiyono; Interview with Wilson. See also George Junus Aditjondro, Menyongsong matahari terbit di puncak Ramelau: Dampak pendudukan Timor Lorosa’e dan munculnaya gerakan pro-Timor Lorosa’e di Indonesia, Jakarta, Yayasan HAK dan FORTILOS, 2000, pp. 249-260; Lane, \textit{Unfinished nation}, pp. 135-136, 153.}

After Suharto’s fall, these efforts began to bear fruit, with East Timor solidarity groups established among more mainstream sections of the student movement. Indonesian Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) active in East Timor, which had previously rejected the political demand for self-determination, were also now increasingly supportive.\footnote{Interview with Faried Cahyono; Interview with Dhyta Caturani and Reiner; Interview with Agung Putri, 14.02.2007, Jakarta; Interview with Wilson.} Despite this, support for the East Timorese remained a minority position among the democracy movement. Some activists accepted Indonesia’s claims to the territory, and others feared they would lose support from mainstream politicians if they raised the issue. Demonstrations specifically in favour of East Timorese independence remained low key affairs.\footnote{Interview with Hilmar Farid; Interview with Nur Widi.} However, some wider protests against the military’s \textit{dwifungsi}, or dual function, which accorded the armed forces the lead role against both military and political threats to the state, began to extend to criticisms of the military’s role in East Timor, as well as in other restive regions.\footnote{van Dijk, \textit{A country in despair}, pp. 329-330.} The direct impact of these developments on Habibie’s decision to grant
self-determination was limited, as acknowledged by the activists involved. But they did ensure that the East Timor issue was linked to demands for wider reform, both internationally and domestically.

There was also an increasing base of support for a change of policy on East Timor among the middle and governing classes, support which had in fact been developing for a number of years. This sentiment was pragmatic, reckoning that if East Timor did not accept Indonesian rule after so long, then it was not worth the financial and diplomatic cost to the rest of the nation. Foreign Minister Ali Alatas had first proposed offering regional autonomy to East Timor as early as 1994. Alatas and his staff were concerned about the high toll the East Timorese issue was taking on their diplomatic efforts, even on seemingly unrelated issues. He reasoned that if autonomy was acceptable to the East Timorese, Portugal would also have to agree to an international settlement of the issue, removing the ‘pebble in the shoe’ of Indonesia’s international relations. Demands for ‘autonomy’, rather than simply ‘integration’, also came to be demanded by East Timorese supporters of the Indonesian occupation. Suharto quickly vetoed any such discussion, but the idea continued to circulate among sections of the middle classes, including among people whom Habibie drew on as advisers when he became vice-president and then president. There are also reports of high level political visitors to the imprisoned Xanana Gusmão even before 1997, suggesting unofficial negotiations over a settlement of the issue.

After Suharto’s fall, East Timor became a widely discussed topic in the context of general political reform. The press began to openly discuss the need for a rational solution to the situation in East Timor, with the influential Tempo magazine referring to the province as ‘Indonesia’s Vietnam’. Even some retired military officers came to support the idea of the autonomy proposal. Reflecting this opinion amongst their

---

85 Interview with Zito Soares, 22.02.2007, Jogjakarta.
86 Crouch, ‘The TNI and East Timor policy,’ pp. 142-144; Greenlees and Garran, Deliverance, p. 37.
87 Anonymous interview with an Indonesian activist.
middle class support base, Amien Rais and future president Abdurrahman Wahid proposed a referendum for East Timor in mid-1998. Sup%

Support for a change of policy was by no means universal. Megawati argued that Habibie lacked a mandate to reverse East Timor’s incorporation into Indonesia, although she later pledged to respect the outcome of the vote. Some Muslim leaders expressed fears it would lead to the breakup of the republic. Wahid also voiced opposition to actually losing control of East Timor, despite having earlier called for a referendum. But the key group opposed to a new policy on East Timor was the military. There were some officers who wanted the East Timor situation resolved in order to save scarce resources, and to advance ‘professionalisation’ of the military, but they were a minority. For most, the passing of twenty-five years had not diminished the ideological stake which the military had invested in the invasion of East Timor, which they had pressed upon a reluctant Suharto. Since then, they had lost as many as 20,000 men dead and wounded in bitter fighting with Falintil. Anything which cast doubt on the legitimacy of the original invasion would further undermine the already battered prestige of the military within Indonesia. In addition, some officers had business interests in the province. Most importantly, the military argued that any concession over East Timor would encourage secessionist movements in other parts of Indonesia, and perhaps bring about the disintegration of the nation. This was unacceptable, a direct challenge to the military’s mission to defend the unitary Indonesian republic.

**Unified international pressure**

As well as domestic opinion, Habibie had to contend with growing international pressure over East Timor. This was an extension of the link made both by foreign governments and international bodies such as the IMF between economic reform, democratisation and human rights. Such pressure had begun several years ago. Although Australia had remained supportive, the US increasingly placed pressure on

---

91 Ibid., pp. 61-62.
92 Greenlees and Garran, *Deliverance*, p. 115.
93 See Tanter, ‘Indonesian politics after Suharto,’ p. 16.
95 Soares, ‘Political developments leading to the referendum,’ pp. 61-62.
Indonesia over human rights issues during the 1990s, especially over East Timor. The events of the Santa Cruz massacre, which unfortunately for Suharto coincided with the end of the Cold War, became emblematic of a brutal regime which was considered increasingly unacceptable. When South African President Nelson Mandela visited Indonesia in mid 1997 he met with the imprisoned Xanana Gusmão and heavily criticised Jakarta’s role in East Timor, drawing intense international attention. With the economic crisis, even Canberra began to change to shift its previously supportive policy, a process discussed more fully in the next chapter.

Both Australia and the US saw Habibie’s presidency as an opening to solve the East Timor problem, and both houses of the US Congress passed resolutions in favour of a self-determination vote in 1998, linking the issue to wider democratic reform in Indonesia.96

Responding to international criticisms over East Timor therefore became a necessity for Habibie as he tried to portray himself as a reformer who could take the country forward. As Ambrosio writes

> International observers saw Habibie’s policies toward East Timor as a litmus test of his commitment to rejecting the negative policies of his predecessor and to embracing both democratic and human rights reforms.97

However reluctant Habibie might have been to concede ground over East Timor, the international community carried a very big stick in the form of IMF assistance:

> Assessed from a pragmatic standpoint, President Habibie probably had little choice but to offer something by way of a concession to the international community. The monetary crisis in South-east Asia was impacting heavily on Indonesia, and arguably the autonomy concession was, in a sense, a trade-off for much needed IMF restructuring loans.98

Much has been made of John Howard’s letter to Habibie in December 1998 suggesting France’s recent agreement in New Caledonia as a model for the move to autonomy. It has been suggested that this was a decisive moment in Habibie’s decision making. The loss of Australia’s previously staunch support over East Timor

---


98 Lloyd, ‘The diplomacy on East Timor: Indonesia, the United Nations and the international community,’ p. 79. IMF concern over East Timor was made explicit when it threatened to suspend loans if Indonesia failed to stop post-ballot chaos, see Chapter Four.
was certainly significant. Nonetheless, Howard’s letter was simply part and parcel of the bulk of international pressure being applied to Indonesia at the time, although it was possibly the straw that broke Habibie’s back.  

From autonomy to self-determination

Following Suharto’s resignation, Alatas revived his earlier autonomy proposal. Habibie agreed to the change in policy, announcing in June that an autonomy package was being considered for East Timor. As discussed above, however, it quickly became obvious that unilaterally imposed autonomy would be unacceptable either to the East Timorese or, consequently, the international community. There are reports that the administration discussed the possibility of a referendum with East Timorese leaders as early as June 1998. Nonetheless, Habibie’s cabinet was somewhat stunned when he announced on January 25th 1999 that he had decided to allow an act of self-determination for East Timor. Technically labeled a ‘popular consultation’ rather than a referendum, the decision was made public on January 27th 1999. Habibie also announced that he wanted the whole situation settled by the year 2000, rather than accepting a transition period stretching on for up to a decade.

Habibie’s eventual support for East Timorese self-determination was seemingly incongruous with his past hard-line on independence, a position he repeated soon after he became president. His shift on the issue has been described as ‘a kneejerk reaction by an erratic leader’, and ‘ad hoc policy making [which] was typical of Habibie – displaying muddled but highminded [sic] sentiments.’ But Habibie’s fluctuating policy was actually an attempt to balance contradictory imperatives in a highly unstable political climate. It is clear that Habibie would rather have kept East Timor within the republic, if East Timorese dissent could be brought to a halt. This would have allowed him to satisfy demands for reform, while also presenting himself as defending the unity of the republic. But if no accommodation with the East Timorese could be found, the possibility of independence had to be raised. As

---


100 Interview with Hilmar Farid.

101 See Fernandes, Reluctant saviour, pp. 34-35.

102 Taudevin, East Timor: Too little too late, p. 277.

103 Greenlees and Garran, Deliverance, p. 93.
numerous commentators have expressed, East Timor was a complicating factor in Habibie’s efforts to solve a multitude of problems. He simply could no longer afford to ignore the situation. The other element of Habibie’s policy that surprised many was the short timeline he proposed to resolve the issue. But from his own point of view, any political credibility he gained from solving reform issues was needed sooner rather than later. Nor was there any advantage in paying for the occupation of East Timor only to eventually lose the province, Habibie’s own stated reason for the fast-track ‘consultation’.

Finally, it is still unclear whether Habibie and his advisors thought that the East Timorese would accept autonomy rather than independence. The autonomy package proposed by Ali Alatas in March 1999 was explicitly designed to be as attractive as possible, in order to avoid a vote for independence, and he also saw a popular vote as ensuring the decision could not be ignored by the military, a strategy which shows he took seriously the possibility the government could lose. There was also an implicit admission of this from Habibie, when he suggested that East Timor should ‘be honorably separated from the unitary nation of the Republic of Indonesia’ if they were to reject the autonomy proposal. At the same time, Alatas continued to insist that autonomy was the best solution for all involved, and as late as March Habibie expressed confidence that the East Timorese would choose autonomy. Again, such confusion arose from the need to solve the East Timor issue while containing domestic political forces, in particular placating the military. These contradictions resulted in a relatively unattractive autonomy proposal finally being put to the East Timorese, as well as lulling the international community into a false sense of security over Habibie’s ability to ensure a peaceful ballot.

104 See Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, pp. 54-55; Dunn, East Timor: A rough passage to independence, p. 341; Fernandes, Reluctant saviour, pp. 34-36; Greenlees and Garran, Deliverance, p. 40; Taudevin, East Timor: Too little too late, pp. 126, 136-137.
105 See Goldsworthy, ‘East Timor,’ p. 228.
107 The comment was made in a briefing note to cabinet ministers regarding Howard’s letter proposing an autonomy package. Cited in Greenlees and Garran, Deliverance, pp. 92-93.
3. A free country, a scorched earth: East Timor, January-September 1999

The pre-ballot period, January-August

If Habibie hoped that an act of self-determination would allow him to slice through the Gordian knot of East Timor without further political cost to Indonesia or himself, he was to be quickly disillusioned. Diplomatically, things went smoothly enough, and on May 5th 1999 Indonesia, Portugal and the UN signed an agreement to conduct a popular consultation on the autonomy proposal. Yet even as these negotiations took place, the Indonesian military was preparing to use violence to disrupt the ballot process.109

The Indonesian military did not accept the legitimacy of the Popular Consultation. When he was informed of Habibie’s decision in October 1998, General Wiranto argued that the military was not yet ready for such a move. Around this time, Wiranto refused Habibie’s request for him to stand down, effectively declaring the military a power outside of civilian control. Yet Wiranto was not prepared to actually challenge for political power, the East Timor decision not withstanding. Moreover, the military was at least partially subject to the same pressures as Habibie himself. Although enjoying greater political autonomy than the president during 1998-1999, the military could not completely ignore domestic and international pressure for reforms, including of the military itself, or the possibility that provocations of the reform movement could spark further domestic unrest. They were also stretched by commitments in other restive provinces, limiting their ability to launch an all out military response to the autonomy proposal.110

As a result, the military could not simply use overt violence to prevent the ballot in East Timor taking place. Instead, they used militias as a proxy in a campaign of intimidation against supporters of independence. This allowed the TNI (Indonesian Armed Forces) to deny they were responsible for violence, maintaining that any violence was due to intra-East Timorese conflict, just as they had in 1974-1975. This tactic was particularly important in resisting international criticism of the TNI, a policy which was quite successful, as discussed in the next chapter.

109 Damien Kingsbury, ‘East Timor to 1999,’ in Guns and ballot boxes: East Timor’s vote for independence, ed. Damien Kingsbury, Victoria, Monash Asia Institute, 2000, p. 27.
In reality, the militias were wholly a creation of the TNI. Territorial paramilitary forces exist in many parts of Indonesia as supplements to the formal security forces, and ‘home defence units’ had been used against independence forces in East Timor since the Indonesian invasion. From mid 1998, in the face of the overwhelmingly strong support for independence, these units were boosted to become semi-autonomous ‘militias’. They received their weapons, funding and orders directly from Indonesian military personnel. There was no particular effort made to hide this association, which was obvious to observers on the ground. Documentary evidence also emerged in August 1998 detailing some of these links, as well as the fact that troop withdrawals agreed to by the TNI were being secretly circumvented.

Soon, thousands of men were enrolled in militia ranks, with particular strength in the regions bordering West Timor, where integration sentiment was always strongest. Based on Australian government sources, Goldsworthy estimates the militia strength at 20,000 around February, compared to 18,000 regular TNI personnel, although the number at any one time must have fluctuated. The ostensible ‘commanders’ of the militias and some militia members were locals, but many others were settlers from elsewhere in Indonesia, and later on men who were brought across the border from West Timor as local recruits deserted. Some were undoubtedly committed to the cause of integrating East Timor into Indonesia, but for most the incentive was a cash wage paid to members, or they were intimidated into joining by threats of violence towards themselves or their families. Conscripted East Timorese often reported the atrocities they had been forced to commit to human rights monitors. Possibly because former East Timorese allies were not considered reliable enough, new militia leaders were put into place who did not necessarily have longstanding ties to the pro-integration movement.

---

113 Taudevin, East Timor: Too little too late, pp. 165-166.
114 Goldsworthy, ‘East Timor,’ p. 236.
115 Peter Bartu, ‘The militia, the military, and the people of Bobonaro district,’ in Guns and ballot boxes: East Timor’s vote for independence, ed. Damien Kingsbury, Victoria, Monash Asia Institute, 2000, pp. 96-97; Kingsbury, ‘The TNI and the militias,’ p. 71.
116 Interview with Agung Putri.
117 Interview with Zito Soares.
Despite their rag-tag composition, the militias soon proved their capacity to create terror and chaos throughout East Timor.\textsuperscript{118} Individuals known to be independence activists or supporters were targeted for assassination or kidnapping, but there were also more general massacres of those who were thought to favour independence. The worst of these was at Liquica on April 6\textsuperscript{th}, when civilians sheltering in a church were attacked, resulting in up to 60 fatalities. TNI and Brimob (paramilitary police) forces were actively involved, both killing civilians themselves and using teargas to flush people out of the church to be slaughtered by waiting militia.\textsuperscript{119} Between January and July 1999 there were several hundred deaths, and around 60,000 East Timorese became internal refugees. Most of these deaths occurred before the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) arrived to supervise the ballot in early June. The militias and TNI were reluctant to actually kill people once the UN presence was established, although beatings, sexual assault and intimidation of independence supporters continued unabated. However in August, the month of the eventual ballot, there was another upsurge in violence, with the worst incident seeing at least eight people killed during a day long militia rampage through Dili.\textsuperscript{120}

\textbf{The ballot and aftermath; August-September}

After months of violence, the day of the actual ballot was remarkably calm. Once again, this showed that the TNI was perfectly capable of reining in the militias when it suited them, and that the militias, or at least their controllers, did not want to prevent the vote actually taking place.\textsuperscript{121} Indeed, over 98\% of people registered to vote did so on August 30\textsuperscript{th}, surpassing all expectations. However, many people emerged from hiding only long enough to vote, and then returned to places of presumed sanctuary, or fled urban areas to the hills where Falintil might provide some protection. Tens of thousands of new refugees joined them. Their fears were well founded. Within hours of the close of voting, the militias resumed their campaign of violence, starting with the murder of two local UNAMET staff who were transporting ballot boxes to Dili for counting.

\textsuperscript{118} The pre-ballot violence has been most thoroughly documented by Robinson, \textit{East Timor 1999: Crimes against Humanity}, especially pp. 44-46, 56-59, 131-216. For first hand accounts, see Martinkus, \textit{A dirty little war}, pp. 116-262; Taudevin, \textit{East Timor: Too little too late}, pp. 209-273.

\textsuperscript{119} A detailed account can be found in Robinson, \textit{East Timor 1999: Crimes against Humanity}, pp. 192-196.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., pp. 44-46. See also Kingsbury, ‘The TNI and the militias,’ p. 73.

\textsuperscript{121} Robinson, \textit{East Timor 1999: Crimes against Humanity}, p. 59.
With militia activity on the rise, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan decided to release the poll results ahead of schedule, on September 4th. The outcome was a resounding endorsement of independence. Over 78% of votes cast were in favour of breaking all ties with Indonesia, despite the campaign of intimidation. However, the announcement triggered a campaign of violence and destruction of even greater intensity than during the pre-UNAMET period. This was facilitated by the increasingly overt participation of the Indonesian security forces, with the line between TNI and militias becoming far more blurred, as many ‘militia’ members were now actually TNI personnel out of uniform. In addition, the militias were now often supplied with modern firearms by the TNI, rather than the crude home-made guns and hand weapons with which they were for the most part previously equipped.122

There were three main aspects to this phase of the violence in East Timor. First, there was a renewal of the politically motivated murders which had largely stopped since the arrival of UNAMET. The victims of this violence were both more numerous and less precisely targeted than before. The first people to be sought out and killed were still individual independence activists and supporters, or their families if they could not be found. But there also were more frequent mass killings than in the pre-UNAMET period. These were directed against groups of displaced persons or whole villages which were considered to be supporters of independence. Among the worst incidents were: dozens of people killed in Dili, including up to 15 internally displaced people in an attack on church buildings; the killing of between 40 and 200 people sheltering in a church in Suai and up to 14 people in a police station in Maliana; the massacre of 82 people over three days at Passabe in the Oecussi enclave; the murder of at least 21 people by Battalion 745 of the TNI as it withdrew from the eastern part of East Timor towards Dili; and the killing of 12 people at Maquelab in Oecussi.123 Robinson estimates that 900 people, and possibly up to 1,200, were killed during this period, compared with around 300 before the poll.124

In addition, untold thousands were physically or sexually assaulted. This sort of violence continued sporadically until the Australian led military mission, Interfet (International Force for East Timor), took control of the territory. However, most of

---

122 See Kingsbury, ‘The TNI and the militias,’ p. 72.
123 Details can be found in Robinson, East Timor 1999: Crimes against Humanity, pp. 221-244.
124 Ibid., pp. 40, 44.
the worst incidents occurred in the days immediately following the announcement of the ballot result. Of the incidents mentioned above, all but the last two occurred between September 5th and 10th.

Second, hundreds of thousands of East Timorese were displaced from their homes. While thousands of people had been forced to flee their homes before the ballot, this number swelled exponentially in the days after August 30th. By the end of October, perhaps 400,000 people, or half the East Timorese population, had been displaced. Up to 250,000 had actually been transported across the border into West Timor by the TNI, the majority of these against their will. Many refugees had money and valuables extorted from them, and in West Timor the militias continued to seek out political opponents for torture and murder. The remainder of displaced persons had fled to areas considered safe, generally to mountainous regions controlled by Falintil. Murders, beatings and sexual violence were an integral part of the process of displacement. While known independence supporters were targeted for violence, whole communities were threatened with the same treatment if they did not acquiesce in the transfer to West Timor. Forced transfers occurred from every region in East Timor, using very similar techniques in every case. Such a massive logistical task was obviously centrally planned at a high level of the Indonesian authorities.

Third, the militias and the TNI set about destroying as much of East Timor’s physical infrastructure as possible, with town after town razed. As with the violence against people, this destruction began in some areas as early as August 30th. Generally, however, systematic arson and looting begun in the days immediately following the announcement of the ballot result, and continued until militias vacated each area. Interfet reconnaissance missions, generally conducted between September 29th and October 2nd, give a sense of the destruction, listing the damage as 97% in Manatuto, 95% in Balibo, 90-95% in Suai, 80% in Maliana, Gleno and Maubara, 70% in Los Palos and 60% in Liquica. In Dili the destruction was virtually total, as the arson

---

125 As violence descended: Testimonies from East Timorese refugees, Amnesty International, no. ASA 21/190/99, 1999; No end to the crisis for East Timorese refugees, Amnesty International, no. ASA 21/208/99, 1999; Robinson, East Timor 1999: Crimes against Humanity, pp. 42-44. Crouch casts doubt on the number of forced deportations by unconvincingly arguing that over 200,000 people could have left voluntarily, if every person who voted for autonomy fled with their children. Crouch, ‘The TNI and East Timor policy,’ p. 160.
continued even after the arrival of Interfet, as the TNI were allowed to freely move around the town transporting accelerants in their trucks.\textsuperscript{127} Not every town or village was destroyed, and in some towns the damage was concentrated in specific areas. But there was substantial destruction in every region of East Timor, with the overall damage estimated at around 70\% of buildings destroyed or rendered unusable. The aim seems to have been general devastation, with houses, shops, schools, medical facilities, churches and electricity, water and telecommunications infrastructure all attacked. Even the police and military’s own barracks were torched as they left each region.\textsuperscript{128} Once again, this scorched earth policy was clearly centrally planned, given the widespread destruction and uniformity of methods.

\textit{The East Timorese response}

The proposed timing and conditions of the ballot caused great concern among the East Timorese leadership. They had proposed a long time frame precisely to allow an orderly transition to independence. Habibie’s arrangements were a guarantee of anything but. After 25 years of occupation and violent repression, no one in East Timor was surprised when the military began its violent campaign against the autonomy proposal. Indeed, Xanana Gusmão had asked for UN peacekeepers in the province as early as November 1998.\textsuperscript{129}

Nonetheless, the East Timorese leadership felt they had a limited window of opportunity in which to achieve their goals. Whatever the cost might be, an internationally recognised ballot favouring independence would be nearly impossible for Indonesia to reject. Even after the post-ballot violence, when asked whether the cost of independence had been too high, Gusmão replied ‘We accept that. There is a price, because what we want more than everything is freedom.’\textsuperscript{130} Independence leaders on the ground in East Timor expressed similar views to UN personnel shortly before the ballot.\textsuperscript{131} In any case, simply canceling the poll would not have resolved

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{127} Ibid., pp. 56-58.
  \item \textsuperscript{129} See Taudevin, \textit{East Timor: Too little too late}, pp. 203, 213-14.
  \item \textsuperscript{130} Alan Attwood, ‘It was the time to sing for a man of few words,’ \textit{The Age}, 12 October 1999, p. 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{131} Interview with Damien Kingsbury.
\end{itemize}
the conflict in East Timor. On the contrary, disappointed independence supporters may have turned to more confrontational strategies to push their claims.

Given the overwhelming military strength of the anti-independence forces, Gusmão’s strategy was to avoid confrontation as far as possible, denying the TNI the opportunity to claim that internal conflict was preventing the ballot. On his urging, independence activists did not campaign overtly through mass rallies, but rather relied on personal contact such as student activists going door-to-door in villages under the guise of ‘voter education’. This was dangerous enough, and in any case the independence leaders were confident of the choice the people would make. Simultaneously, Falintil were ordered not to engage the militia or TNI forces, although Gusmão’s contradictory call in April for the guerillas to defend the people from militia violence was taken by some as an order to recommence offensive operations. Falintil’s forces voluntarily entered a series of UN monitored cantonments from early August, where they remained armed but for the most part inactive. Residents of urban areas offered some physical resistance to the militias, particularly in independence strongholds in Dili. Barricades were built, and residents armed themselves with makeshift weapons. This resistance had some success before the ballot, but became completely inadequate as the ballot approached, when the TNI operated in more open collaboration with the militias, and the latter were given better arms.

For Gusmão, restraining Falintil was part of a policy which relied on receiving succor from external sources, rather than the East Timorese themselves overcoming the Indonesian forces. It caused significant disquiet amongst Falintil fighters, the incarnation of physical resistance to the occupation, and was not always strictly obeyed. Even before the ballot, there were reports of ‘liberated’ villages in

---

135 For an account of the cantonment, see Cristalis, Bitter dawn, pp. 169-191; Martinkus, A dirty little war, pp. 243-250.
136 Sam King, ‘Dili under siege,’ Green Left Weekly, 1 September 1999, p. 17; Jon Land, ‘East Timor: what role for peacekeepers?’ Green Left Weekly, 8 September 1999, p. 3; Martinkus, A dirty little war, pp. 146, 236.
137 For accounts of the policy and Falintil reactions, see Cristalis, Bitter dawn, pp. 259-260; Greenlees and Garran, Deliverance, pp. 230-231; Martinkus, A dirty little war, pp. 374-378.
mountainous areas in the East, which were beyond the control of Indonesian and pro-
integration forces. The post-ballot destruction understandably stretched the
guerillas’ discipline to breaking point. They had to endure pleas from East Timorese
civilians who complained that they were being abandoned after years of suffering
due to their support for the guerillas. Gusmão and Ramos-Horta had to beg Falintil
commander Taur Matan Ruak not to leave the cantonments early in September.
Ramos-Horta even resorted to ‘guaranteeing’ international intervention, although he
was in no position to do so. Despite this, frustrated by Interfet’s slow deployment, some Falintil units did indeed leave cantonment, engaging in offensive actions
against the TNI and militias. By the time Interfet arrived, Falintil was largely in
control of the Eastern parts of the country. The tardiness of international forces
and disagreements over the role of the guerillas was to cause significant tension
between Interfet and Falintil commanders, as discussed in Chapter Five.

The role of the United Nations and Portugal

There were obvious deficiencies in the so-called ‘5th of May’ agreement between
Indonesia, Portugal and the United Nations. Without a neutral security force in the
territory, the UN was relying on the goodwill of the TNI to maintain order. But by
May it was all too clear that the TNI intended the precise opposite. Questions have
therefore been raised as to whether the ballot should have been delayed, or not
allowed to take place at all. Cotton gives the UN the benefit of the doubt, arguing
that agreeing to the weak mandate was due to an ‘underestimation’ of the TNI’s
reluctance to vacate East Timor, especially in light of the post-ballot destruction. Ian Martin, UNAMET chief, gives some support to such an interpretation, writing
that while the UN was ‘not naïve’ on this issue, they misread positive signals
emanating from Jakarta and

---

138 Cristalis, Bitter dawn, pp. 169-177.
139 Greenlees and Garran, Deliverance, p. 231.
142 Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, p. 63.
underestimated the extent to which many Indonesians and pro-autonomy East Timorese still believed that the coercive autonomy campaign would be successful, or nearly successful.  

Nonetheless, the UN was well aware of security problems during negotiations with Indonesia. They repeatedly asked Habibie to allow an international security force into the territory, but this was not something on which he was prepared to compromise. Instead, the UN was to provide an unarmed police monitoring force. Indonesia was to reduce troop numbers in the province and ensure order was maintained, neither of which conditions were fulfilled. This does not mean that the UN were faced with a take it or leave it situation. The key issue is whether more pressure could have been applied to Indonesia to ensure a secure environment before and after the ballot, an issue discussed in more detail in the next chapter, along with Australia’s role in the process.

From the point of view of the UN personnel charged with negotiating and implementing the agreement, however, the choice was between accepting Indonesia’s terms or not having an act of self-determination at all. The UN bureaucracy, like the East Timorese leadership, wanted a decisive settlement of the question. This could only be achieved by holding a ballot, regardless of perceived limitations in the arrangements. The Portuguese government also wanted the issue resolved within the limited time available. This would fulfill a constitutional requirement inherited from the revolutionary period of 1974-75, and bring an end to domestic political pressure from advocates of East Timorese independence. It would also advance Portuguese efforts to ‘overcome national feelings of guilt and shame’ regarding the country’s colonial legacy. Habibie’s presidency seemed to offer a limited window of opportunity in which to achieve these goals.

In the event, violence in East Timor did lead UNAMET to postpone the ballot by three weeks in mid-June, and by a further three days in mid-July. Finally, however, it

---

147 Gorjao, ‘The end of a cycle,’ p. 102.
was believed that the situation could only be resolved by holding the ballot, and further delays would simply fuel anger on both sides.

4. Method amongst madness: Motivations for violence in East Timor

If the actions of the Indonesian military and militias are by now well known, their aims remain somewhat murkier. Several factors confuse the issue. First, it is important not to conflate their motivations in the pre and post-ballot period. Second, while the role of local military commanders in creating the militias is unquestionable, it is less clear from which point on the chain of command their orders originated. There was certainly a coordinated plan of violence across East Timor, which probably emanated from the highest levels of the military. But in the absence of any ‘smoking gun’ documentary evidence, it remains unclear exactly what details of the campaign were conducted according to a pre-arranged plan, at what level such a plan was ordered, and which individuals bear chief responsibility. The full truth may never be known, given the reluctance of the Indonesian authorities to investigate the events, and the likelihood that there was no formally documented master plan for what were serious criminal offences both internationally and under Indonesian law. Finally, although the militias were the creation of the TNI, the military did not necessarily control everything they did or said. Militia commanders such as the flamboyant Eurico Guterres, commander of the particularly vicious Aitarak militia, clearly enjoyed their high profile and sense of power. Whatever they may personally have believed, their threats and boasts were not always realistic.

The purpose of pre-ballot violence

With these limitations in mind, several possible motivations for the anti-independence forces can be identified. One stated aim of the militias was to break at least the three western regions of East Timor away from a newly independent country, to remain part of Indonesia. The plan is attested to by a number of eye

---

148 As several otherwise careful authors have done. See Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, pp. 62-64; Kingsbury, ‘The TNI and the militias.’; Robinson, East Timor 1999: Crimes against Humanity, p. 48.
149 For a discussion of command responsibility and documentary evidence, see Robinson, East Timor 1999: Crimes against Humanity, pp. 80, 253-263.
This may well have been a genuine motivation for local militia, who would have stood to gain significant power in any rump Indonesian province of East Timor. However, it is doubtful that this was ever a possibility politically, or that it had high level support in the TNI, as discussed below. Similarly, there is no evidence to suggest the TNI wanted to actually prevent the poll going ahead. Soares argues that this plan was only prevented by Falintil’s restraint in responding to militia violence, thus undermining the TNI’s excuse to cancel the referendum.\(^{151}\) This hardly seems a sufficient reason for the TNI to change its plans. On the contrary, as Robinson demonstrates, the TNI reduced militia activity in order to avoid the embarrassment of the UN canceling the ballot on security grounds.\(^{152}\)

Rather than cancel the ballot, the military wanted to influence the result through sheer intimidation. Their use of violence not only undermined independence campaigning, but also served as a warning of what might happen if the East Timorese voted the wrong way. Exactly how much impact this had on the result will never be known. Some authors argue that the TNI assumed they could engineer an outright victory for autonomy, based on their view of the military as arrogant and totally out of touch with the local population which they regarded as a malleable ‘floating mass’.\(^{153}\) Yet, given that their inability to control the province was one reason the ballot was taking place at all, it is unlikely that military commanders on the ground were completely unaware of popular opinion, although they may have been reluctant to convey this to their superiors.\(^{154}\) Moore provides documentary evidence that TNI officers in the province had long engaged in a kind of ‘doublethink’, in which they believed their own self-justifying propaganda that the East Timorese supported integration, but at the same time had to confront the real


\(^{151}\) Soares, ‘Political developments leading to the referendum,’ p. 65.


\(^{153}\) Fernandes for example argues this is why the ballot result was such a shock, Fernandes, *Reluctant saviour*, p. 75. Others to argue, although less emotionally, that the TNI at least initially thought that they could win the ballot include Crouch, ‘The TNI and East Timor policy,’ p. 149; Kingsbury, ‘The TNI and the militias,’ p. 77; Robinson, *East Timor 1999: Crimes against Humanity*, p. 48. The term ‘floating mass’ was a New Order concept which justified a ban on opposition parties organising among the general Indonesian population, who supposedly only needed to think about politics at election time. While certainly elitist, this doesn’t imply that the population was considered infinitely malleable; on the contrary, it was designed to pre-empt mass political action because it had the potential to challenge the regime. See Lane, *Unfinished nation*, pp. 45-49.

situation in order to conduct operations against the resistance. Although they could have hoped to sway public opinion when the militia policy was first initiated, Crouch, Moore and Dunn all convincingly argue that at some point before the vote the TNI accepted that the ballot would endorse independence. This argument is supported by the so-called ‘Ganardi document’, written by an assistant to the Minister of Political and Security Affairs in early July, which recommended that contingency planning for a defeat in the poll must begin quickly.

And yet violence actually increased in the month before the vote. Most likely, some officers in the TNI thought that if autonomy was defeated by a narrow margin, it would provide an opportunity to discredit the ballot. Along with the general chaos and impression of intra-East Timorese violence, this would at the very least be a face saving exercise for the TNI, and they might even be able to reverse the result. Their invasion and occupation of East Timor could continue to be justified internationally as having prevented chaos in the region, leaving the blame for the violence with the UN and other supporters of the ballot. But the chief purpose of such face saving measures would be domestic politics. Kingsbury plausibly argues that Wiranto was using the violence to demonstrate the continued power of the military over Habibie’s civilian government. The violence would also show up Habibie’s self-determination policy as a failure. Additionally, even if the military considered the situation in East Timor as entirely hopeless, they could not be seen to surrender meekly to independence demands. This would only have encouraged separatist movements in other provinces, a factor discussed more fully below.

156 Although they differ considerably on when this occurred. Crouch, ‘The TNI and East Timor policy,’ pp. 158-159; Dunn, *East Timor: A rough passage to independence*, p. 350; Moore, ‘The Indonesian military’s last years in East Timor: An analysis of its secret documents,’ pp. 33-38. Ballot observer Dr. Damien Kingsbury believes the military accepted it would lose some time in August, Interview with Damien Kingsbury. This was also the opinion of UN personnel on the ground, see Lindsay Murdoch, ‘Terror tactics an admission of defeat at polls, says UN,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August 1999, p. 19.
157 A detailed discussion can be found in Robinson, *East Timor 1999: Crimes against Humanity*, pp. 75-76. As Robinson discusses, the Ganardi document itself was not a plan of this sort, but argues that such a plan should be developed, recommending measures similar to what took place in September.
159 Kingsbury, ‘The TNI and the militias,’ p. 73.
Motivations for violence in the post-ballot period

The interpretation of post-ballot violence has also been contentious. At the time, the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT) in Australia claimed that Indonesian authorities were conducting ‘ethnic cleansing’ aimed at ‘exterminating’ hundreds of thousands of East Timorese, and referred to the events as ‘genocide’. Media reporting understandably focused on the worst aspects of militia violence, without it being possible to place such incidents in a wider context, given a lack of information. References to ‘genocide’, the Holocaust or Pol Pot’s regime were common. Since then, Fernandes has also labeled the post-ballot events as ‘ethnic cleansing’, which aimed at decimating the East Timorese population and at creating ‘new demographic facts on the ground’.

However, the Indonesian forces did not aim for the physical liquidation of the entire population, but rather the application of more limited violence in order to intimidate the entire population. Genocide on this scale would have required substantial infrastructure and planning, none of which is in evidence, and there were no moves towards mass killings of refugees in West Timor. This is not to diminish the appalling scale and intensity of the violence in East Timor in September 1999. The post-ballot violence and destruction was certainly far wider in scope than earlier attacks, and was aimed at inflicting damage on East Timorese society as a whole. But it was not indiscriminate, being constrained by factors beyond the TNI’s control, and it had a political purpose beyond sheer brute vengeance.

There are several explanations of what this purpose might be. First, it has been seen as a continuation of the TNI’s attempts to prevent East Timor becoming independent. Most emphatic in this argument is Fernandes, who goes so far as to state that ‘For all


162 Fernandes, Reluctant saviour, pp. 79, 114. It is not entirely clear whether Fernandes means through mass murder or the permanent dislocation of the population.
its visceral, punitive aspects, the main objective of Indonesia’s terror campaign was to reverse the result of the ballot.¹⁶³

Fernandes argues that the TNI’s strategy was to remove international observers, then use the militias to provoke Falintil into a conventional war. This could be used as cover for a TNI ‘intervention’ in which they could ‘Create new facts on the ground, ensuring that the results of the ballot were irreversibly overturned.’ Falintil and independence leaders could be eliminated once and for all.¹⁶⁴ The plan was initially successful, with the declaration of martial law paving the way for the assassination of independence leaders and destroying Falintil. But at this point the TNI were prevented from fulfilling their plan by Falintil’s refusal to engage militarily, and they were then ‘compelled’ to leave the province.¹⁶⁵

However, with international observers withdrawn, there seems no reason why a determined TNI could not have actively sought out Falintil, given the fact that for the first time in 25 years the TNI could be relatively certain of the location of the majority of the guerillas in their cantonments. But instead of launching a military operation, the TNI and Polri (Indonesian Police) devoted massive resources to the forced population transfer. At the same time, the Indonesian government began evacuating its personnel as early as September 5th,¹⁶⁶ and both the TNI and militias had completely left many areas before Interfet arrived, as discussed in Chapter Five. They even destroyed their own bases and communications infrastructure, undermining their ability to undertake future military campaigns. Far from being ‘compelled’ to leave by international action, the Indonesian withdrawal, accompanied by the scorched-earth policy and forced removal of the population, began in the days immediately following the ballot announcement, well before the announcement of the Interfet intervention on September 12th.

Moreover, there seems no logic in devastating the majority of physical infrastructure of a province you intend to continue occupying. As Nevins argues, ‘The scorched-
earth nature of the TNI-militia rampage made it clear that the Indonesian military had no intention of staying in the territory.\textsuperscript{167} The scorched-earth policy also casts doubt on the idea that there was a serious intention to split the three western regions from East Timor. Far from being spared, the relative strength of the militias there meant that these regions saw the most intense personal violence and physical devastation. Looting was also most thorough close to the border, where logistical difficulties eased, and even sheet metal roofing and bathroom fixtures were torn from buildings.\textsuperscript{168}

The idea that the military wanted to reverse the ballot also ignores the political problems this would have posed. As already discussed, the TNI were constrained by the underlying reasons that the ballot was granted in the first place, and they felt unable to simply prevent the ballot taking place. These limitations were multiplied by the ballot result, which demonstrated so convincingly the lack of support for Indonesian rule. This was the most important ‘fact on the ground’, that no amount of brute violence could change. Nor was there any serious domestic political support for trying to undermine the ballot, either wholly or in the western provinces. Alatas even moved to prevent the counting of votes on a regional basis, so that a majority for autonomy in one region could not be used as an excuse for splitting it from an independent East Timor.\textsuperscript{169} If Habibie was to benefit at all from solving the East Timor problem, he needed a clean break from the province. Instead, Habibie paid the political price for the post-ballot events, with the ‘national humiliation’ of Interfet’s intervention sealing his political downfall in late October.\textsuperscript{170} Yet none of Habibie’s rivals made any move to lead a campaign to overturn the result, and indeed Megawati had been explicitly warned off making any such moves by Australian Foreign Minister Downer.\textsuperscript{171} In October, the People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR)

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., p. 102.
\textsuperscript{169} Martin, \textit{Self-determination in East Timor}, p. 88.
formally ratified East Timor’s referendum result with little fuss, all political parties having already agreed to the decision.\textsuperscript{172}

The second main explanation for the post-ballot destruction emphasises the personal role of TNI officers and their psychological response to the independence vote. This was the explanation put forward by both Habibie and Wiranto at the time, who argued that ties of loyalty prevented the military reigning in the militia. Although rejecting the crude self-justifications of the Indonesian authorities, Crouch argues that personal motivations of two sorts were indeed the most important factor in the post ballot violence.\textsuperscript{173} The first element he suggests is the simple exaction of revenge after a humiliating defeat. Second, indicating a ‘more rational calculation’, was the need to legitimise Indonesia’s invasion and occupation of East Timor, by giving credibility to the idea that the violence was due to internal conflict. These are certainly plausible motivations for individual officers, whose attitudes did impact on the scale of the violence in any given region throughout 1999.\textsuperscript{174} But these factors alone do not explain the high level of planning which appears to be behind the scorched earth campaign.\textsuperscript{175}

Nonetheless, the impact of a vengeful officer corps does mesh with and complement the third and most likely explanation of the policy of destruction, that it was intended to prevent the further break-up of Indonesia or the erosion of the TNI’s power. Nevins puts the case well:

it is likely that the killings, rapes, and destruction were intended as an example, a message sent to restless regions within Indonesia’s sprawling archipelago and to that country’s dynamic pro-democracy, workers’ rights, and human rights movements that challenging the authority of the military would exact a very high cost.\textsuperscript{176}


\textsuperscript{175} Crouch himself unconvincingly argues that there is no positive evidence for a ‘long prepared military plan’, so we must rely on local explanations. See Crouch, ‘The TNI and East Timor policy,’ pp. 161-163.

\textsuperscript{176} Nevins, \textit{A not-so-distant horror}, p. 5. Cotton and Kingsbury also consider this at least a contributing reason for the destruction. See Cotton, \textit{East Timor, Australia and Regional Order}, pp. 62-64; Kingsbury, ‘The TNI and the militias,’ p. 77.
This reaction must be seen in the context of the self-accorded dwifungsi (dual function) of the Indonesian military under the New Order regime, under which they were responsible not only for defending the Indonesian nation against external threats, but also against any internal ‘enemies’ who threatened the stability of the state. Communism, political Islam, liberalism and ethnic and regional separatism had all been viewed as such threats since Independence. In this role the military did not consider itself as subject to civilian political control, and indeed viewed military involvement in the parliament and non-defence sectors of the bureaucracy as essential to maintaining order. Although the end of the Cold War seemed to reduce the threat from Communism, the subsequent fracturing of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia only served to increase the military’s fears that a move from an authoritarian to liberal political regime could lead to the breakup of Indonesia as a unitary nation. With the fall of Suharto, the military’s worst fears seemed to be realised. Not only was the cohesion of the state under threat from various sources of internal dissent, but also, as discussed earlier, the military’s own political position was increasingly being questioned.

As such the significance of the ballot result in East Timor for the ongoing power of the TNI within Indonesia, and its ability to prevent the further disintegration of Indonesia, should not be underestimated. As Kingsbury writes, the ballot result was a rejection not just of Indonesia, but of the idea of ‘Indonesia’. The unity of the state was challenged, the concept of nationalism was slapped in the face, the guardians of the state were made to look foolish. The people of East Timor were made to pay for this.

Separatist movements and civil conflicts in Aceh, West Papua, Ambon and Kalimantan were important political issues throughout 1998 and 1999.

---


178 Ibid., pp. 181-189.

179 Ibid., p. 195. This was also a theme taken up by the Indonesian press in 1999, see ‘Reformasi, nationalisme etnik dan kemalangan negara-negara besar,’ *Republika*, 7 February 1999, p. 9; Santoso Amir, ‘Disintegrasi bangsa,’ *Kompas*, 7 September 1999, p. 4; Goenawan Mohamad, ‘Bangsa,’ *Tempo*, 25 January 1999, p. 85.

180 Kingsbury, ‘The TNI and the militias,’ p. 78.

was widely seen as a possible pre-cursor to further unrest in disgruntled Indonesian provinces, including by the Indonesian military and commentators in Australia and Indonesia.\(^\text{182}\) Habibie’s administration was repeatedly forced to deny that other provinces would be given the same chance to succeed, especially Aceh.\(^\text{183}\) The links between their own situation and wider issues of separatism would have been apparent to any officer stationed in East Timor, whether or not they received orders which made these links explicit. The impetus to punish the East Timorese even while retreating would have been reinforced by the military’s entrenched doctrine of *bumihangus*, or ‘scorched earth’, when retreating from an enemy, which dated from the campaign against the Dutch.\(^\text{184}\)

From the TNI’s point of view, the East Timorese independence movement was indeed an enemy, who should be denied the fruits of their victory. Most importantly, the destruction of East Timor served as a warning to other potential ‘enemies’ seeking independence from Indonesia. The murders and physical destruction made opting for independence seem a terrifying prospect. This was heightened by the mass deportations, which also gave the militias increased time to target independence supporters amongst the refugees. Potential independence supporters in other provinces might simply rethink the cost of separatism. Conversely, both the militias and the TNI had long threatened East Timor’s devastation if it chose independence.\(^\text{185}\) If these threats were not made good, their ability to intimidate other restive populations would be greatly diminished.

This strategy seems to have had the desired impact, although in an indirect way. In his capacity as political advisor to the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), Damien Kingsbury notes that Acehnese leaders were not discouraged by the threat of suffering a similar fate to East Timor if they achieved independence. However, the extreme reaction of the TNI in East Timor convinced them that the military would


\(^\text{184}\) See Greenlees and Garran, *Deliverance*, pp. 201-202.

\(^\text{185}\) For examples, see Kingsbury, ‘The TNI and the militias,’ p. 72; Soares, ‘Political developments leading to the referendum,’ p. 66.
not permit another province to break away, and that any President who allowed a
ballot on Acehnese independence would be subject to a military coup. Partly as a
result of this, GAM negotiated an autonomy agreement with the Indonesian
government in 2003, abandoning their earlier goal of complete independence. Some
West Papuan independence leaders have adopted a similar approach.\textsuperscript{186}

As with pre-ballot violence, however, the TNI could not afford to be completely
open about this. The militias, or their own personnel disguised as militias, were used
to gain an element of deniability in the face of international scrutiny, while still
delivering an unmistakable message to separatists in Aceh and West Papua. The
‘departure’ of substantial sections of the population was intended to give credence to
the TNI’s ongoing claims that the chaos in East Timor was due to an internal
conflict, and that the vote was a farce.\textsuperscript{187} Additionally, the punishment inflicted
allowed TNI hardliners to save some face against their reforming opponents within
the military and Indonesian society more generally, as well as facilitating the
destruction of evidence of earlier crimes.\textsuperscript{188}

\textit{Indonesia’s decision to leave East Timor}

Although the TNI eventually became resigned to losing control over East Timor,
independence for the province was not inevitable in May 1997, or even August or
September 1999. Cotton argues that the ballot itself was irrelevant, because

\begin{quote}
The logic of integration was dependent upon a complete identification of the
interests of the population with those of Indonesians at large. Once the
possibility of those interests being distinct was admitted, and given the
sentiment that existed for independence, change was inevitable.\textsuperscript{189}
\end{quote}

This understates the fluidity of the post-Suharto political situation in Indonesia. One
or both of the Indonesian political or military leadership could have dug in their heels
over the issue, forcing a confrontation with their opponents. From Suharto’s fall
onward, however, this became increasingly unlikely, as to do so would have been to
incur a price far beyond what East Timor was worth to either of them. The ballot was
merely the culmination of a series of domestic and political issues forcing the hand

\textsuperscript{186} Interview with Damien Kingsbury.
\textsuperscript{187} Nevins, \textit{A not-so-distant horror}, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{188} See Cotton, \textit{East Timor, Australia and Regional Order}, p. 64; Kingsbury, ‘The TNI and the
militias,’ p. 78.
\textsuperscript{189} Cotton, \textit{East Timor, Australia and Regional Order}, p. 20.
of the Indonesian authorities, and the result was no great revelation. But it was the final factor in undermining the TNI’s position in the province. The subsequent actions of the military indicate that they had resolved to depart given such an overwhelmingly adverse ballot result, although not without exacting a terrible toll.

This has important ramifications for how Australia’s subsequent intervention in East Timor is viewed. First, the Indonesian government and military decided to leave East Timor because the benefit they derived from the occupation was no longer worth its political and economic cost. They were not compelled to do so by the arrival of Australian forces, and Australia’s role is therefore far more ambiguous than being the ‘saviour’ of the East Timorese people, as Fernandes puts it. Second, whether or not East Timor became independent was a question largely beyond Australia’s control, leaving the Howard government to respond to Indonesia’s own decision making. The remainder of the thesis examines the reasons for Australia’s intervention light of these circumstances.
Chapter Four

The Decision to intervene in East Timor

1. Government decision making before the referendum

In June 1997 John Howard could confidently state that

We do remain particularly concerned about the human rights situation in East Timor. A confrontational approach, however, and refusal to accept its place as an integral part of Indonesia, will not bring the right results for those we wish to assist.¹

He was restating a 20 year old bipartisan orthodoxy in Australian parliamentary politics, an orthodoxy which seemed secure. And yet just over two years later, Australian military forces were deployed to secure the independence of East Timor, a situation previously declared to be impossible and contrary to Australia’s interests. While all commentators agree on the dramatic nature of this policy reversal,² there is little consensus as to its causes. Some writers have emphasised the role played by popular pressure on the Howard government, while others have stressed the intrinsic moral imperative for intervention. The second half of this chapter examines this debate, and argues that both of the predominant ways of explaining Australia’s involvement in East Timor are inadequate. First, however, it is necessary to examine in some detail the process by which the Howard government arrived at its final position on East Timor.

Pressure mounts for a change in policy

By late 1997 pressure was beginning to mount for the Howard government to reassess its policy on East Timor. The East Timorese independence movement was given a significant boost in 1996, when José Ramos-Horta, Fretilin’s (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) international spokesperson, and Carlos Belo, the Bishop of Dili, were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The award conferred legitimacy and drew media attention around the world. By early 1997 the United States was becoming increasingly critical of the Suharto government, in particular over human rights abuses in East Timor, as well as the blatantly undemocratic parliamentary elections held in May. The US also began fostering ties with opposition groups it saw as becoming powerful in a post-Suharto Indonesia. This approach, however, was rejected by Australia, and in June Howard explicitly justified his stance by reference to Indonesia’s economic progress and political stability.

However, the Australian press began to pay increasing attention to East Timor. There was a steady stream of articles and editorials about East Timor throughout 1997, prompted by events such as the visits of United Nations (UN) officials to East Timor, or criticisms of Indonesia by the US government. Bishop Belo especially began to be portrayed as a morally worthy leader. But attention was focused on human rights abuses, rather than the possibility of a fundamental settlement to East Timor’s predicament. This began to change when South African President Nelson Mandela visited Indonesia in September, and met jailed resistance leader Xanana Gusmão. Significantly, this visit came shortly after chaotic Indonesian parliamentary elections, and at the beginning of Indonesia’s economic crisis, when questions were starting to be asked over Suharto’s future. In this context, the possibility of resolving the East

---


4 Transcript of address by John Howard hosted by the Foreign Policy Association, New York.


Timor issue, for example by giving it autonomous status, began to be considered. After Suharto’s fall, there were increasing calls in the press for the East Timor issue to be solved permanently, as part of the shift to democracy. By November, even Greg Sheridan, a prominent supporter of the Suharto government, had come to see change in Timor as inevitable.

In Australian politics, the first shift in East Timor policy was not made by the government, but rather by Laurie Brereton, Labor Party spokesperson on Foreign Affairs. In August 1997 Brereton proposed a policy which stated that

> It is Labor’s considered view that no lasting solution to the conflict in East Timor is likely in the absence of a process of negotiation through which the people of East Timor can exercise their right of self-determination.

This position was ratified in January 1998 at the Labor Party federal conference, by which time Indonesia’s economic and political crisis had begun in earnest.

The change in Labor’s policy was not without cost, igniting a vicious and public argument in party circles. Brereton intensified his rhetoric on the issue in February 1999, publicly denouncing both the Labor and Liberal parties’ records on East Timor over the previous quarter century as a ‘long and tragic history’, singling out former Labor Prime Ministers Whitlam, Hawke and Keating for criticism. Whitlam responded sharply, stating that

> The shadow minister for foreign affairs is the least educated foreign minister or shadow foreign minister that the Liberals or Labor Party have ever had… I will not be blackguarded by the shallow, shabby, shonky foreign affairs spokesman on our side in the Federal Parliament.

---


11 Cited in Don Greenlees, ‘Labor policy ups ante for autonomy in East Timor,’ *The Australian*, 18 October 1997, p. 5.


There was also some opposition within parliamentary Labor to Brereton’s forthright stance, particularly from then backbencher Kevin Rudd, who opposed Brereton’s position in January 1999 that UN peacekeepers should be present in East Timor before the ballot, a division played upon by the Liberals. Labor’s embarrassingly public debates were evidence of the deep divisions within the party over the issue, as well as the extent to which figures such as Whitlam and Keating had staked their personal reputation on the issue. But they also revealed the importance Brereton placed on updating what he thought was an increasingly out of date policy.

Brereton, convener of the group ‘Parliamentarians for East Timor’, was undoubtedly prompted by political principles, as well as a desire to bring Labor policy into line with what probably the majority of Labor supporters had always felt was the correct position. But more significantly, he was also attempting to move Labor policy into alignment with the new domestic situation in Indonesia. Labor leaders Kim Beazley and Gareth Evans, former Defence and Foreign Affairs ministers respectively, supported Labor’s policy shift, although they continued to defend their previous record. Brereton highlighted the need to build links with democratic groups opposed to Suharto, as well as playing up the possibility of a new settlement in East Timor post-Suharto, particularly since leaders such as Abdurrachman Wahid supported a change of policy. Labor was attempting to show that it had a more realistic policy than the Howard government in relation to Indonesia’s changed situation, stressing the ‘underlying continuity between Whitlam’s approach… and that of the Howard government today…’ It was a position borne out over the next eight months.

**Shifts in Australian policy, May 1998 to August 1999**

Although it initially rejected Labor’s new East Timor policy, the Howard government was finally also forced to react to the changing situation in Indonesia. While the Liberal Party avoided such sharp internal conflict as Labor, their policy shift was eventually nearly as dramatic, and was no less a repudiation of positions.

---

formerly declared to be fundamental to Australia’s foreign policy. The pressure for change came in part from the discussion of the issue in the Australian media and from Labor’s new stance. But more importantly, Howard and Downer departed from previous policy by making direct contact with a number of East Timorese leaders, as detailed in the following two pages. These contacts revealed that the problems in East Timor were unlikely to be resolved without a genuine act of self-determination. This reality on the ground, coupled with Habibie’s decision to force the pace in reaching a settlement, forced the Australian government to continually reassess and refine its East Timor policy between May 1998 and the ballot on independence in August 1999.

When Habibie came to power in May 1998, there was no immediate change in the Australian approach to Timor. Downer’s first statement on the issue called for a ‘greater degree of participation by the public in the political process’ across Indonesia, and proposed that in East Timor there should be a reduction in the military presence and a greater degree of control by local people. But, as Downer himself emphasised, this was no more than both sides of Australian politics had been saying for years, and he refused to call for the release of East Timorese political prisoners.

By June this attitude had started to shift. A diplomatic cable from June 23rd shows that while Australia wanted the issue settled internally, it was thought that this could only be achieved through genuine negotiation with East Timorese independence leaders. Accordingly, the government began making tentative approaches both to their Indonesian counterparts and, for the first time, to leading independence figures. In June, John McCarthy became the first Australian Ambassador to visit East Timor since the Indonesian occupation. Unlike previous visits by Australian officials to East Timor, McCarthy did not only speak to supporters of integration, but also sought out leaders of the independence campaign.

---

18 As discussed by Fernandes, *Reluctant saviour*, p. 31.
focusing on trying to understand the practicalities of costing and
administrating a new country, and seeking ideas from locals on how they
view neighbourhood relations under such a scenario.\textsuperscript{21}

This was followed by a visit by Australia’s military attaché in November, the first
such visit since 1984, in part to investigate a massacre which took place that month
in the town of Alas, but also to renew contacts with Indonesian military personnel.\textsuperscript{22}

A crucial issue was the role to be played by Xanana Gusmão, universally recognised
as the key East Timorese leader. In August, Downer reversed his previous position,
and called for the release of Gusmão, saying that he ‘has a central role in the
resolution of the East Timor issue.’\textsuperscript{23} Meanwhile, Ambassador McCarthy had been
regularly meeting Gusmão in prison, from which he reportedly ‘came away
impressed with [Gusmão’s] leadership qualities and his realism.’\textsuperscript{24} Part of this
realism was to agree not to prejudice the interests of oil companies already operating
in the Timor Sea, an agreement subsequently used by Australia to pressure East
Timor during negotiations over resources in the area (see Chapter Five).\textsuperscript{25} McCarthy
was not Gusmão’s first Australian visitor, however; a representative of mining giant
BHP had already paid his respects, and also received assurances over the security of
the company’s interests in an autonomous or independent East Timor.\textsuperscript{26}

In July, after consulting with his counterpart Ali Alatas, Downer initiated a survey of
opinion amongst key East Timorese leaders with a variety of positions on
independence.\textsuperscript{27} The results, delivered in August, did not bode well for either the
Indonesian or Australian positions. Integration with Indonesia, even with special
autonomous status, remained unacceptable to the majority of East Timorese as a
permanent solution. Moreover, almost everyone consulted agreed that a genuine act

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{21}{Lansell Taudevin, \textit{East Timor: Too little too late}, Potts Point, Duffy & Snellgrove, 1999, pp. 155. Taudevin, an Australian aid worker, was an unofficial source of intelligence for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in East Timor.}
\footnotetext{22}{Cotton, ‘The East Timor commitment and its consequences,’ pp. 111-113; John Martinkus, \textit{A dirty little war}, Sydney, Random House Australia, 2001.}
\footnotetext{23}{Robert Garran, ‘Downer call to free rebel,’ \textit{The Australian}, 20 August 1998, p. 5.}
\footnotetext{25}{Interview with José Teixeira, 21.11.2007, Dili.}
\footnotetext{26}{Following Indonesian government protests, this employee was relocated from Jakarta. Cotton, \textit{East Timor, Australia and Regional Order}, p. 17; David Jenkins, ‘BHP talks to jailed guerilla leader,’ \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald}, 20 August 1998, p. 8.}
\end{footnotes}
of self-determination was needed to gain popular acceptance of any change in East Timor’s status.\textsuperscript{28} As such, Habibie’s proposal of unilaterally declared autonomy would not solve the issue. This knowledge seems to have had a major impact on the conduct of Australian policy from late 1998.\textsuperscript{29}

In November, staff from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) were instructed to draw up potential options for a dramatically changed Australian policy on East Timor. Attention focused on the example of New Caledonia. Under the Matignon Accords of 1988, France had granted autonomy to its colony, along with a promise of an eventual act of self-determination, which is due to occur sometime after 2014. Early in December, Howard and Downer decided that Australia would encourage Indonesia to accept a similar arrangement in which, after an intervening period of autonomy lasting ‘many years’, the East Timorese would be offered a choice between independence and permanent autonomous status.\textsuperscript{30} This was a major turning point in Australian foreign policy. As early as May 25\textsuperscript{th}, Howard had indicated that he was not averse to an act of self-determination.\textsuperscript{31} But to actually push for such an act was to abandon Australian policy since 1975. The new support for an act of self-determination was conveyed to Habibie in a letter from Howard on December 21\textsuperscript{st}.\textsuperscript{32} Unsurprisingly, it could not be kept secret for long. Knowing that the Indonesian press was about to go public with the story, Downer announced Australia’s new position on January 12\textsuperscript{th} 1999, saying that

\begin{quote}
The rapidly evolving situation in Indonesia and on the ground in East Timor demands a constructive response to the question of the future of East Timor… I am of the view that the long term prospects for reconciliation in East Timor would be best served by the holding of an act of self-determination at some future time, following a substantial period of autonomy.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{29} And perhaps also the thinking of Indonesian officials, with whom the result of the consultation were shared. See the evidence of a DFAT official, \textit{East Timor: Final report of the Senate foreign affairs, defence and trade references committee}, p. 176.
\textsuperscript{33} The press release is reproduced in Ibid., p. 183.
Despite the dramatic break with past policy, Australia’s somewhat cautious proposal soon became outdated, as Habibie announced in late January that he wanted East Timor’s future settled by the year 2000. Australia was not directly involved with planning the act of self-determination, the details of which were agreed between Indonesia, Portugal and the UN. These arrangements were announced on May 5th, with the UN assuming responsibility for organising the ballot. However, Australia provided important support for the process. In February, Downer visited Gusmão and Habibie in Jakarta, as well as his counterpart in Portugal, to discuss the situation.

Despite their previous differences on the Timor question, Portugal and Australia now agreed to co-ordinate their support for the UN sponsored ballot, with an Australian diplomat stationed in Lisbon for this purpose. Australia committed funding for an international relief program, complementing Portugal’s pledge of funding for any transitional government in East Timor. Later, Australia was also the largest financial contributor to the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) which conducted the ballot, Darwin was used as a logistics and training base, and the Australian Electoral Commission provided technical support for the ballot.

However, Australia and Portugal disagreed on the issue of whether or not there should be an international peacekeeping force in East Timor before the ballot. The security situation in East Timor began to deteriorate from late 1998, as outlined in the previous chapter. Portugal maintained that a neutral armed force was essential to allow a free and fair ballot. The East Timorese leadership appeared divided on the issue. Australia argued that armed troops would inevitably become party to the conflict, rather than remain neutral. In any case, Indonesia would never agree to the presence of foreign armed forces on what they (and Australia) still regarded as their sovereign territory. This was a position that Australia held to until the ballot, despite worsening violence, although Howard did ask Habibie to allow a peacekeeping force when the two met in Bali on the April 27th. This request was rejected, and only unarmed UN police were allowed into East Timor under the so-called ‘5 May

---

35 Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, pp. 91-92.
36 Ibid., p. 94.
Agreement’. An Australian police officer eventually headed this force, joining another 37 Australians out of a total 275 officers.\textsuperscript{38}

A somewhat ironic symbol of the Coalition’s newfound commitment to East Timorese self-determination was the naming of former National Party leader Tim Fischer as head of the official Australian mission to observe the election. It was quietly forgotten that in 1996 had Fischer declared that Suharto should be named ‘man of the world of the second half of this century’ because of his contribution to progress in the region.\textsuperscript{39} Fisher omits this detail from his published account of the ballot, instead proudly overestimating Howard’s role in persuading Habibie to grant East Timor a referendum.\textsuperscript{40}

\textit{Policy made on the run, along a tightrope}

While support for self-determination for the East Timorese was a major departure from previous Australian policy, other elements in the approach to East Timor’s status remained intact. As Downer later commented,

\begin{quote}
It wasn’t a 180 degree change of course, it was a 30 degree change. But there had been no change for 25 years, so in that respect a 30 degree change was quite historic.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

The first element of continuity was ongoing recognition of Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor, which flowed into the Australian position that Indonesia, and not the UN or other international personnel, would be solely responsible for security before and after the ballot. Second, Howard and Downer reaffirmed that they believed the best solution to the issue was that East Timor should remain an integral part of Indonesia, albeit with the newly announced autonomous status.

Howard’s letter to Habibie first stated this position;

\begin{quote}
I want to emphasise that Australia’s support for Indonesia’s sovereignty is unchanged. It has been a longstanding Australian position that the interests of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{38} Cotton, \textit{East Timor, Australia and Regional Order}, p. 93.
\textsuperscript{39} ‘Suharto a world great, says Fischer,’ \textit{The Canberra Times}, 15 May 1996.
\textsuperscript{40} Tim Fischer, \textit{Ballot and bullets: Seven days in East Timor}, St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 2000, pp. 9-18.
\textsuperscript{41} Quoted in Greenlees and Garran, \textit{Deliverance}, p. 86.
Australia, Indonesia and East Timor are best served by East Timor remaining part of Indonesia.\textsuperscript{42}

This remained Australia’s official position up until the ballot. However, the detail of the government’s rhetoric changed substantially over this time.\textsuperscript{43} In February, Howard publicly defended the preference for autonomy, saying

\begin{quote}
I would prefer an autonomous East Timor within Indonesia… [because otherwise] I think there would be an inherent instability. There would be an economic and strategic vulnerability. There would be the potential for, I think, ongoing tension between Indonesia and the independent East Timor…\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

By mid-March Howard seemed to accept that East Timor would be independent sooner rather than later, saying

\begin{quote}
We think it would be better if they had a period of autonomy inside Indonesia but if they refuse to go down that path then they have a right to insist on independence. We only hope that Indonesia helps them, it doesn’t pull out too quickly, it doesn’t leave them with inadequate resources because it is quite a poor country with a low living standard.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

Likewise, in a major speech on East Timor in early March, Downer did not even express Australian support for autonomy as a final solution, stressing instead the need for a peaceful transition, whatever the Timorese decided.\textsuperscript{46} The public support for autonomy was deemphasized over time, because the government increasingly came to believe that the East Timorese would probably choose full independence, something Downer admitted publicly as early as February.\textsuperscript{47} Eventually, the issue was simply dropped from government pronouncements, until just before the ballot.

\textsuperscript{46} Address by Alexander Downer in the Australia-Asia Institute’s Australia in Asia Lecture Series, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 01.03.1999 (accessed 21.03.07, http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/speeches/foreign/1999/990301_indon_trans.html).
when Downer announced that ‘At this sensitive time it makes sense for us to be neutral and let the people of East Timor make up their own minds.’\textsuperscript{48} Continuing to push strongly the idea that the East Timorese should choose to remain within Indonesia could only be an embarrassment after the ballot.

There were two reasons that Howard preferred a lengthy timeframe for self-determination. The first was a concern that an immediate ballot would result in instability and violence. The second was the hope that even if autonomy was currently unacceptable to the East Timorese, they might be persuaded of its benefits after a period of less oppressive rule from Jakarta.\textsuperscript{49} At least some personnel within DFAT believed that this was the situation in New Caledonia.\textsuperscript{50} Habibie’s decision to settle the issue quickly undermined this policy, however, leaving Australia scrambling to catch up with the rapidly changing situation on the ground.

Fernandes argues that

\begin{quote}
It is a revisionist distortion to claim that this letter is evidence of Howard’s support for East Timorese self-determination. The truth is the exact opposite: Howard was trying to contain the pressure for independence.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

Howard’s ostensible support for a referendum after a period of autonomy was disingenuous, because ‘the Howard government’s autonomy proposal would result in a state of affairs that consigned an act of self-determination to oblivion.’\textsuperscript{52} This is an oversimplification on Fernandes’ part. On the one hand, it is true that Howard continued to see East Timor’s incorporation into Indonesia as most suiting Australia’s strategic interests. But at the same time the new policy was based on a recognition that East Timorese independence might now be inevitable.\textsuperscript{53}

By December 1998, Howard already knew that a lengthy delay might well be the best outcome for which he could hope. Rather than simply supporting the \textit{status quo} of Indonesian occupation, Australia was actively trying to manage a process which threatened to get entirely out of control. There was concern that the situation in

\textsuperscript{48} Lindsay Murdoch, ‘Australia neutral on East Timor: Downer,’ \textit{The Age}, 1 August 1999, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{East Timor: Final report of the Senate foreign affairs, defence and trade references committee}, p. 177.
\textsuperscript{51} Fernandes, \textit{Reluctant saviour}, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p. 40.
\textsuperscript{53} On the changing balance of these considerations in policy making, see White, ‘The road to INTERFET,’ pp. 74-76.
Timor itself might deteriorate rapidly if expectations for a settlement were not met. Less directly, Australia’s standing as a regional power was also at stake, because the outdated policy on East Timor threatened to marginalize Australia’s place in Jakarta’s changing strategic landscape, and also to undercut the value in Western strategic circles of Australia’s traditional role as interpreter of the Indonesian scene.

By supporting self-determination Australia was at least ensuring it played a role in the process. It should be remembered that Howard’s preferred scenario, where an act of self-determination would only take place after a transitional period of autonomy lasting many years, was actually the same as many East Timorese leaders at the time. It is also notable that in June 1999 Australia in fact lobbied against significant delays in the election timetable, offering extra logistical support to the UN mission to facilitate a speedy settlement of what was an increasingly unstable situation.

But while doing its best to shape developments in East Timor, Australia’s freedom of action was limited by a continued need to manage the wider relationship with Indonesia. The negative reaction from the Indonesian government to Australia’s decision to support self-determination, even though Indonesia would announce a more radical policy two weeks later, showed the potential damage the issue could cause to the bilateral relationship. Australia’s concern in this regard was displayed most strongly in its failure to push Indonesia to allow international peacekeepers into East Timor before the ballot, although the military sponsored violence threatened to bring about the very instability Australia feared. Howard did raise the issue with Habibie. But neither Australia nor the US brought serious pressure to bear. In particular, there was no attempt to use Indonesia’s financial vulnerability as a point

---

56 For some similar considerations, see Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, pp. 215-216; Paulo Gorjao, ‘The end of a cycle: Australian and Portuguese foreign policies and the fate of East Timor,’ Contemporary Southeast Asia 23, no. Apr (2001), pp. 111-113; Greenlees and Garran, Deliverance, p. xiii.
of leverage, or to break off arms sales and military ties, although such pressure was readily applied after the ballot.\(^{59}\)

Moreover, once Australia had decided that it would not risk the relationship with Indonesia over security in East Timor, it rejected overtures from the United States regarding the issue. In February, the chief of DFAT dismissed as ‘defeatist’ the opinion of the US State Department’s Indonesian expert that a full-scale peacekeeping operation in Timor was inevitable.\(^{60}\) Then, in a series of embarrassing leaks in August 1999, it was revealed that US diplomats had offered to begin planning for a peacekeeping mission in East Timor, led by Australia but involving substantial US forces. This offer, however, was rejected by Canberra as ‘premature’ and harmful to Australia-Indonesia relations.\(^{61}\) Whether the offer of US troops would have actually materialised is debatable, given that the US’s eventual contribution was mainly in logistics. But if Australia had wanted to push strongly for a pre-ballot peacekeeping force, its US ally may well have supported the decision.

The corollary of Australia’s stance on peacekeepers was that the Howard government consistently played down the violence which was occurring in East Timor, and, where this was not possible, attempted to shift the blame away from the Indonesian government. At first, the Australian government denied that there was credible evidence of the TNI (Indonesian Armed Forces) arming the militias. When this position became discredited, the government began to blame so-called ‘rogue elements’ within Indonesia’s military.\(^{62}\) This directly contradicted the picture provided by Australia’s intelligence networks, which by the end of 1998 had all but concluded that there was a deliberate TNI policy of using militias against the independence movement. Early in 1999 more details were ascertained, implicating high level TNI officers.\(^{63}\)

The pattern of denial began late in 1998, when the Australian government publicly praised Indonesian troop withdrawals from East Timor, despite intelligence showing


these withdrawals to have been faked.\textsuperscript{64} Next, Downer used a report from Australia’s military attaché to play down reports of a massacre in Alas in November, although it was later revealed that the attaché only spent two hours in the area.\textsuperscript{65} Doubts were also cast over the extent of the violence, for example after the April massacre in Liquica.\textsuperscript{66} As militia violence intensified in early 1999, too much evidence of TNI involvement had emerged to be totally denied. Downer therefore attempted to shift responsibility away from top Indonesian officials, for example in late March saying that

while we accept that is not the official policy of the Indonesian Government
or military forces, there is a risk that some rogue elements may be, or may
have been, providing arms to the so-called paramilitaries in East Timor.\textsuperscript{67}

However, this policy of misinformation was undermined by a series of embarrassing
leaks from within Australia’s own intelligence network, as well as from the
Indonesian military, which revealed the real TNI policy.\textsuperscript{68} But despite this mounting
evidence, Downer still confidently proclaimed in late July that

We have been very open with what we have had to say about the activities of
the TNI… Our expectation is that the TNI will start to behave in a more
neutral way and there are some signs of improvement.\textsuperscript{69}

As Fernandes argues, the effect of Australia’s rhetoric was to support Indonesia’s
strategy of pretending the violence in East Timor was purely a result of tensions
between rival groups of East Timorese, in which the Indonesian military was
neutral.\textsuperscript{70} At times Downer directly encouraged this view, for example lecturing pro-
independence supporters organising for self-defence that ‘We urge all the parties to

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{64} A fact leaked to the press soon afterwards. Ball, ‘Silent witness,’ p. 41; Lincoln Wright, ‘ADF knew
\item \textsuperscript{65} Robert Garran, ‘Downer rejects E Timor killings,’ \textit{The Australian}, 9 December 1998, p. 7; Rebecca
Rose, ‘Timor probe lasted two hours,’ \textit{The West Australian}, 9 January 1999, p. 11. See also
Fernandes, \textit{Reluctant saviour}, p. 50; Martinkus, \textit{A dirty little war}, p. 113.
\item \textsuperscript{66} For example see Adrian Rollins, ‘Canberra doubts over Timor deaths,’ \textit{The Age}, 12 April 1999, p. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Cited in Rebecca Rose, ‘Diggers to help Timor: Downer,’ \textit{The West Australian}, 1 April 1999, p. 16.
\item \textsuperscript{68} For examples, see Paul Daley, ‘Armed with information, now what?’ \textit{The Age}, 29 May 1999, p. 4;
Paul Daley, ‘Soldiers flooding East Timor: Report,’ \textit{The Age}, 17 March 1999, p. 3; Peter Hartcher and
Tim Dodd, ‘E Timor sabotage coming from top,’ \textit{The Australian Financial Review}, 8 July 1999, p. 1;
Brendan Nicholson, ‘Documents reveal Indon terror link,’ \textit{The Age}, 8 May 1999, p. 3; Brendan
Nicholson, ‘I warned embassy in Jakarta: Worker,’ \textit{The Age}, 22 April 1999, p. 10; Tony Wright and
Michael Millett, ‘Downer shrugs off Timor accusation,’ \textit{The Age}, 24 April 1999, p. 1. See also Cotton,
\textit{East Timor, Australia and Regional Order}, p. 94.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Cited in Sian Powell, ‘Message of hope for Dili,’ \textit{The Australian}, 31 July 1999, p. 12.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Fernandes, \textit{Reluctant saviour}, pp. 47-48.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
act with restraint and to remember violence begets violence.'\(^71\) Yet even the official Australian version of events in East Timor admits that the government knew of the links between TNI members and the militias from January 1999, and were aware from March that there was a deliberate TNI policy of trying to incite violence in East Timor in order to undermine the ballot.\(^72\) Downer later argued that for Australia to have publicly exposed the TNI policy ‘would have terminated our relationship with Indonesia.’\(^73\) Instead, Canberra preferred to express its concerns to Jakarta through private diplomatic and military contacts, and it is officially claimed that 120 such representations were made before the ballot.\(^74\) Apparently, they were entirely without success.

2. The decision to intervene in East Timor

Following the vote for independence, the Australian government was faced with a rapidly deteriorating security situation in East Timor. In just a few days, the decision would be made to embark Australia on its largest military operation since the Vietnam War, in which it would play the lead role in an international coalition. The government’s response has been criticised as tardy and ill prepared. In fact, prior military preparations and a flurry of diplomatic activity allowed Australia to launch a comparatively rapid response to the situation.

Military preparations before September 1999

A major criticism of Australia’s policy in 1999 was that the use of armed force to control the violence came too late, and that more should have been done to allow rapid insertion of peacekeeping forces.\(^75\) Such criticisms are only partly justified. It

\(^71\) Cited in Ian McPhedran, ‘Timor on brink of civil war,’ Herald Sun, 7 April 1999, p. 6.
\(^72\) East Timor in Transition 1998-2000, pp. 57-61. White has likewise acknowledged the government was well aware of the TNI-militia links, White, ‘The road to INTERFET,’ p. 77. Amnesty International also released a report in June 1999 which gave detailed information regarding the links between the TNI and the militias. See East Timor: Seize the moment, Amnesty International, no. 21/49/99, 1999.
\(^73\) Cited in Greenlees and Garran, Deliverance, p. 166.
\(^74\) Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, p. 94.
\(^75\) For examples of contemporary media criticisms, see Paul Daley, ‘Timor’s pain, Australia’s shame,’ The Age, 11 September 1999, p. 3; Paul Kelly, ‘Shattered myths,’ The Australian, 11 September 1999, p. 25; Julie McCrossin, ‘Putting a leash on talkback’s dogs of war,’ The Australian Financial Review, 10 September 1999, p. 12; Mike Seccombe, ‘A special relationship?’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 11 September 1999, p. 35. For a variety of academic criticisms, see Scott Burchill, ‘East Timor, Australia and Indonesia,’ in Guns and ballot boxes: East Timor’s vote for independence, ed. Damien Kingsbury, Victoria, Monash Asia Institute, 2000, p. 180; Fernandes, Reluctant saviour, pp. 94-95; Leaver,
is true that Australia did not support sending a peacekeeping force to East Timor before the ballot, despite the predictability of violence. This was because Indonesia rejected the idea, although, as already discussed, Indonesia was not pressured to accept a force. Moreover, given Australia’s rejection of a pre-ballot intervention, it could not openly prepare for an immediate post-ballot intervention either. Apart from having an equally damaging impact on the relationship with Indonesia, any such moves would have confirmed the main criticism leveled at the government domestically, that Indonesia’s pledge to maintain security after the ballot could not be trusted. There was open discussion of a UN peacekeeping mission when Indonesia handed over control of East Timor, but this was not expected to eventuate until months after the ballot.76

Behind the scenes, however, Australia’s defence and intelligence machines were being cranked into action. Just as the extent of Australian intelligence on the TNI and the militias was kept secret, so was the extent of Australian military planning for possible intervention in East Timor. The Australian government almost certainly anticipated the general post-ballot strategy of the Indonesian military, although they may have been surprised by the extent of the physical destruction. It was widely expected among the media and UN personnel on the ground that there would be extensive violence after the ballot, and the ‘Ganardi’ document outlining Indonesian plans was publicly available.77 It is impossible to believe then, that the situation was not fully understood by Australian intelligence, whose resources in East Timor were extensive. As Ball details, Australia had effective penetration of Indonesia’s military communications, from satellite telephone calls between senior military officers in Dili and Jakarta, down to walkie-talkie transmissions within East Timor. Photographic intelligence on East Timor was provided by Australian reconnaissance flights and US satellite imagery.78 In addition, Australia had access to various human

76 For example, see Mark Riley, ‘Timor: Plan for UN rule,’ The Age, 31 July 1999, p. 1.
77 For example, see Mark Dodd, ‘Fears of bloodbath grow as militias stockpile arms,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 26 July 1999, p. 9; Mark Dodd, ‘Jakarta to abandon free Timor,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 20 July 1999, p. 1; Lindsay Murdoch, ‘Poll may not end Timor killings,’ The Age, 10 July 1999, p. 19.
78 Ball, ‘Silent witness,’ pp. 40-44. See also East Timor: Final report of the Senate foreign affairs, defence and trade references committee, pp. 183ff; Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, p. 94; Lyons, ‘The secret Timor dossier.’ The extent of Australia’s intelligence coverage was revealed
intelligence sources on the ground in East Timor throughout the first half of 1999. These included diplomatic and military personnel attached to the newly opened Australian consulate and UN observer mission.  

Due precisely to worrying intelligence assessments, military planners started considering their options in East Timor from early in 1999. Planning was kept highly secret, because any suggestion that Australia did not accept Indonesia’s guarantee that they would maintain security after the ballot would have a major political impact, both domestically and in relations with Indonesia. After the announcement of the 5 May Agreement, detailed planning began for ‘Operation Spitfire’, an evacuation of Australian and other foreign nationals in the event of post-ballot violence.

It is unclear whether planning for the evacuation was used consciously as a political cover for planning the later intervention, but in effect this is what occurred. Fernandes stresses that Spitfire was planned purely as an evacuation, not the large scale military deployment Australia eventually undertook. However, from the beginning Spitfire planned for two contingencies. The first called for the use of only small numbers of armed Australian personnel if, as eventuated, Indonesian forces cooperated with evacuations by air. This plan was put into action on September 6th, including the evacuation of UN personnel and a greater than expected number of East Timorese refugees.

But plans were also made for a far stronger Australian force to be inserted into East Timor in order to secure key areas, such as Dili’s airport and harbour. This spearhead could then wait for more substantial international forces to arrive. This second plan came to form the basis for ‘Operation Warden’, as Australia’s initial deployment in late September became known. As Breen writes in his detailed account, ‘In simple terms, Operation Warden was Operation Spitfire with more combat power and a

---

79 Interview with Damien Kingsbury, 14.12.2006, Melbourne. For Australian aid worker Lansell Taudevin’s reports on militia activities, see Taudevin, East Timor: Too little too late, pp. 177-178.


81 Fernandes, Reluctant saviour, pp. 104-111. This is also noted by Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, p. 116; Greenlees and Garran, Deliverance, p. 236.

82 Breen, Mission accomplished, pp. 7-14.
larger logistic tail. This possibility was recognised even as Spitfire was being implemented, with command of the evacuation operation given to Major General Peter Cosgrove, who would also have to be in control of any more substantial operation, in his role as commander of the Deployable Joint Force Headquarters.

Also for this reason, Cosgrove had been involved in early planning for eventualities in Timor, and had recommended as early as May that two battalions of light infantry, as well as armoured personnel carriers, be used to secure vital points in Dili. This was essentially the plan that was implemented in the first two days of Operation Warden, although the role of the 1st Battalion (light infantry) in the initial plan was instead fulfilled by 2nd Battalion due to a scheduled operational rotation. In effect, logistical planning for Operation Warden also began as early as July. But logistics officers were explicitly forbidden, for example, to purchase additional stores or pre-position supplies and personnel in northern Australia, in case Indonesia learnt of the preparations. Some officers did, however, begin to learn Timorese dialects.

Finally, there are also reports that Australian special forces made landings in East Timor from April 1999, in order to reconnoitre potential landing sites as well as observe the Indonesian military, a high-risk endeavor that points to preparations for major operations.

Two other decisions made by the government earlier in 1999 smoothed eventual operations in Timor. The first was putting the 5/7th Battalion (mechanised infantry) on a heightened state of readiness from March, such that the unit was ready to deploy within 28 days. The second was the lease in April of a high speed catamaran, capable of rapidly moving personnel and equipment from Darwin to East Timor, which was used in the first deployment of Australian troops. At the time of both decisions, the media immediately drew a link for preparations for peacekeeping in East Timor. In the case of the infantry battalion this was incorrect, as it was only incorporated into

---

83 Ibid., p. 21.
84 See Ibid., pp. 23-24, 33-43. More detail of the deployment is given in the next chapter.
85 Ibid., p. 123.
87 Ian Hunter, ‘Elite forces scouted island from April,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 11 October 1999, p. 11. In June, the Indonesian military made public allegations that foreign helicopters were violating Indonesian airspace over Timor, see Mark Dodd, ‘Militias: Australia points finger,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 10 June 1999, p. 8.
operational plans after the ballot. But both decisions do again indicate that the government was strategically planning for a period of heightened military operations.

As Cotton argues, none of this should be taken to mean that there was advance planning for the full-scale international peacekeeping operation that Interfet (International Force for East Timor) was to become. But there was substantial preparation for the Australian military’s immediate task of securing Dili and surrounding areas as Indonesian forces were withdrawn. The net result was that within two weeks of the decision to intervene, Australian troops were operating on the ground in East Timor.

Australian decision making, September 4th to 7th 1999

In light of criticisms that the Australian government moved too slowly to intervene in East Timor, it is valuable to examine the decision making process in early September in detail. The key decision making body during this time was the National Security Committee (NSC), a sub-committee of Cabinet including the Prime Minister and Defence and Foreign Ministers, as well as key defence and intelligence advisors. This body met on August 30th to consider options for evacuating Australian personnel from East Timor, including seizing control of parts of Dili if the Indonesians did not cooperate. However, with the ballot itself passing relatively peacefully, Downer played down the prospects of a rapid deployment of peacekeepers to East Timor, and instead claimed vindication for his earlier opposition to an armed UN presence.

Nonetheless, despite emphasising that Indonesia remained responsible for security, on August 26th the Australian military had been ordered to prepare to evacuate foreign nationals from East Timor, several days before the ballot. Personnel required for the operation were pre-positioned and placed on standby from August 27th. With the security situation deteriorating rapidly, Downer spoke to his Indonesian counterpart on September 5th to discuss an Australian evacuation operation, and

89 Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, p. 116.
90 See White, ‘The road to INTERFET,’ pp. 80-81.
92 Transcript of interview with Alexander Downer on ABC TV, 31.08.1999; Paul Daley, ‘Downer “right” not to call for peace force,’ The Age, 1 September 1999, p. 13.
Indonesia gave approval for flights out of Dili and Baucau. On the same day, the head of UNAMET formally requested assistance to evacuate his staff. The minimal force version of Operation Spitfire was put into operation, and on September 6th evacuees began to be airlifted out of Dili by the Australian Air Force. The next day flights also commenced out of Baucau, and the evacuation was completed on September 13th. But even while the evacuation was underway, planning for a more substantial military deployment was also begun. From September 5th, General Cosgrove and his staff rapidly updated their earlier contingency plans, and their proposal was approved by top military officers on September 7th. Preparations for the deployment then began in secrecy.

Meanwhile, Canberra’s attention had also already shifted to the need for a more substantial peacekeeping mission. On September 4th, Downer gave the first indication that Australia would be prepared to lead an international coalition to rapidly restore security in East Timor. He also revealed that Australia had already sought international support for such a mission. The next morning, Howard contacted Habibie to seek Indonesia’s permission for such a mission, but was rebuffed. Nonetheless, on September 6th and 7th, the NSC met to consider situation, and decided to commit Australia to military intervention in East Timor.

Some voices began to call for Australian forces to be sent to East Timor with or without Indonesia’s approval. This was not only the preserve of Left-wing activists; by September 8th even the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised

> Australia should end this dangerous period of uncertainty. It should declare its intention to move troops into East Timor if Indonesia doesn’t restore order

---

95 For an account, see Breen, *Mission accomplished*, pp. 5-14.
96 Ibid., p. 21; Greenlees and Garran, *Deliverance*, p. 237.
97 For a detailed account of the decision making process, see Greenlees and Garran, *Deliverance*, pp. 236-239.
99 It seems that an in principle decision was made on the 6th, but that a detailed proposal was only considered on the 7th. See Geoffrey Barker, ‘Howard calls for UN pressure,’ *The Australian Financial Review*, 7 September 1999, p. 8; Cotton, *East Timor, Australia and Regional Order*, p. 95; Greenlees and Garran, *Deliverance*, p. 239; Lincoln Wright, ‘Our troops ready to go: PM,’ *The Canberra Times*, 8 September 1999, p. 1. Then Deputy Secretary of Defence White recalls that the NSC was meeting for long periods at this time, often without reaching firm conclusions, but that the relevant Ministers had agreed on this position by the end of the 7th. White, ‘The road to INTERFET,’ p. 82.
immediately and if, in that event, the UN Security Council fails to call together urgently a peacekeeping force.\textsuperscript{100}

However, such a possibility was never considered by the government. The NSC decided that Jakarta’s go ahead was an absolute precondition for action. A strong UN mandate was also considered necessary, although this would be a ‘coalition of the willing’ style intervention, not a formal UN peacekeeping operation, and hence could be organised far more quickly. For political reasons, the involvement of Southeast Asian nations in the coalition was considered vital. For both political and more practical reasons, substantial United States involvement was also deemed a priority, not least in order to fill gaps in Australia’s military capacity. In fact, the NSC originally decided to offer just 2000 Australian troops out of an international force of around 7000. It soon became clear, however, that the only country with the will and capacity to lead such a mission was Australia itself, and it would have to supply the bulk of the forces.\textsuperscript{101}

\textit{Diplomatic maneuvers}

In the first three weeks of September, Australia found itself at the centre of an international diplomatic whirlwind. Militarily, Australia had made significant preparations for intervention. Diplomatically, however, the government had been arguing against making such an intervention. This meant that frantic activity was now needed to ensure international support for the venture, in particular from the United States, as well as to obtain Indonesian acceptance.

The most important task was to obtain full support from the United States. This was more difficult than Howard might have expected. Australia undoubtedly played the leading role in this particular episode of the alliance relationship. In early September, opinion in the US administration was divided on the issue of East Timor.\textsuperscript{102} As late as September 5\textsuperscript{th}, it seemed the US was at best indifferent towards Australian calls for a peacekeeping force, placing the emphasis on Australia and Indonesia managing


\textsuperscript{101} Cotton, \textit{East Timor, Australia and Regional Order}, pp. 72-74.

security between them. In particular, the Pentagon was reluctant to become involved at a time when they were already heavily committed to the conflict in Kosovo, and when no vital US interests seemed at risk.

On the other hand there was more support from within the State Department, particularly from the Assistant Secretary responsible for Indonesia, Stanley Roth, who threatened Indonesia with a peacekeeping deployment even before the ballot results were known. Ultimately, such voices prevailed within the administration, with the decision to support a peacekeeping force made public on September 9th.

Apart from the US interest in regional stability, an argument was made that the Australian alliance itself was at stake. One official supporting intervention argued that

We don’t have a dog running in the East Timor race, but we have a very big dog running down there called Australia and we have to support it.

Clinton himself later cited the importance of the alliance as a major reason for the US becoming involved. The US also faced diplomatic pressure from Portugal and Britain to commit to the peacekeeping effort.

Within Australia, there was strong criticism of the US over its initial reluctance to support the peacekeeping initiative, as well as the failure to provide ground forces. This was seen in the media as ingratitude, given the years of faithful Australian support for US led missions. This annoyance did seem to be briefly shared by the Australian government, and the issue was used in pushing for US support.

---

104 Mark Metherell, ‘US threatens international intervention force if violence continues,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 3 September 1999, p. 8.
106 Cott, ‘The East Timor commitment and its consequences,’ p. 223. See also Fernandes, Reluctant saviour, p. 97; Greenlees and Garran, Deliverance, pp. 245-247.
107 Greenlees and Garran, Deliverance, p. 246.
108 Including by some who are strong supporters of the alliance. For examples, see Piers Akerman, ‘US shows its true colours,’ The Daily Telegraph, 9 September 1999, p. 11; Duncan Campbell, ‘Invisible friends are no comfort,’ The Australian, 15 September 1999, p. 13; Editorial, ‘Australia faces its biggest test,’ The Age, 9 September 1999, p. 20; Editorial, ‘The new reality of our US ties,’ The Australian Financial Review, 9 September 1999, p. 18; Editorial, ‘US should send peacekeepers,’ The Canberra Times, 9 September 1999, p. 8; Robert Garran, ‘US should repay loyalty,’ The Australian, 8 September 1999, p. 4; Bill Hayden, ‘Don’t forget we’re on our own,’ The Australian, 14 September 1999, p. 15.
However, part of the blame for Washington’s tardy response must also lie with Australia itself.\textsuperscript{110} The Howard government publicly and privately downplayed the risk of post-ballot violence, and hence the need for an international peace-keeping style force. Australia also rejected several suggestions from the United States in the first half of 1999 that the two countries should prepare a peacekeeping force. Moreover, there is evidence that in the lead up to the ballot Australia deliberately withheld intelligence from the United States which proved the involvement of high level Indonesian officers in the violence in East Timor. Such actions were designed to help maintain relations with Indonesia, but they also complicated Australia’s efforts to garner United States’ support once the decision to intervene was finally made.

In any case, Australia’s military planners were more concerned with US capacity in logistics, intelligence and other ‘niche’ areas, which were eventually provided, rather than combat troops.\textsuperscript{111} In addition, the positioning of US naval assets off the coast of East Timor, including a strong complement of Marines, was a tangible warning against any opposition to Australia’s forces on the ground.\textsuperscript{112} Most importantly, the US provided strong diplomatic support, as discussed below. On September 12th, Howard proclaimed himself satisfied with the US contribution.\textsuperscript{113}

With the United States on board, Australia began to seek wider international support for an Australian led intervention. Coincidentally, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, which met from September 9th, offered a convenient vehicle for high level negotiations.\textsuperscript{114} There was by now broad support for Australia’s position, and a number of countries were willing to contribute to the


\textsuperscript{110}On these tensions between the allies, see Coral Bell, ‘East Timor, Canberra and Washington: A case study in crisis management,’ \textit{Australian Journal of International Affairs} 54, no. 2 (2000), p. 71; Lyons, ‘The secret Timor dossier.’


\textsuperscript{113}Michelle Grattan, ‘Howard happier with ‘limited’ US commitment,’ \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald}, 13 September 1999, p. 9.

peacekeeping force. Operationally, the most important contribution would come from Australia’s traditional allies, the United States, Britain and New Zealand, who provided essential support and ground forces early in the operation. Politically, support from a range of Asian nations was also deemed important, both by Australia and Indonesia. Though sometimes only nominal in military terms, politically useful contributions were obtained from Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea. General international support resulted in a strong mandate being approved by the UN Security Council on September 15th, allowing Australian forces to take ‘all necessary measures’ to fulfill their mission.

Finally, Indonesia needed to be persuaded to allow an international peacekeeping force on to what they still claimed as their sovereign territory. Once the United States put its weight behind calls for peacekeepers, Jakarta retreated from its supposedly intractable position relatively quickly. By September 8th US rhetoric had shifted against Indonesia, with Secretary of State Albright saying that if they would not stop the violence ‘it was essential for them to invite the international community to take care of this’, and a State Department statement explicitly threatening Indonesia’s relationship with the US. This was followed by Clinton’s statement that ‘If Indonesia does not end the violence, it must invite the international community to assist in restoring security’, and a warning that Indonesia’s economy would be ‘crashed by this if they don’t fix it’. On the 9th, the US suspended military ties with Indonesia. This was a step further than Australia itself was prepared to go, with Canberra only suspending some planned military exercises on the 10th, while announcing a review of the relationship in the future. US diplomatic pressure was backed by economic threats, with the World Bank and IMF announcing they would suspend over US$6 billion in financial assistance until the East Timor situation was resolved.

---

119 Cited in Gay Alcorn, ‘Clinton puts pressure on Jakarta,’ The Age, 11 September 1999, p. 21.
Jakarta could not resist this sort of pressure for long. Crucially, not only Habibie but also armed forces chief General Wiranto became reconciled to losing East Timor. While haggling continued over the details, Habibie announced on September 12th that he would accept the peacekeeping mission, bringing to an end nearly a quarter of a century of Indonesian occupation.

3. Explaining Australia’s involvement: The existing debate

Australia’s dramatic reversal in policy on East Timor, and the consequent military deployment, have been the subject of much academic discussion, revolving around two main analytical frameworks. First, Australia’s intervention has been seen as the result of popular pressure on the Howard government. This position has been most fully argued by Clinton Fernandes. Second, the intervention has been seen as a natural or inevitable response of the Australian state to an overwhelming moral imperative. This position has been the most common in mainstream academic accounts, but has particularly been developed by James Cotton.

Not all discussions fall neatly into these two categories. Some authors have invoked a variety of reasons for the deployment, without necessarily giving one factor greater weight than the other. Such accounts, though, lack analytical depth. In addition, some explanations incorporate elements of both analyses, as discussed below.

However, the work of Fernandes and Cotton are taken here as representatives of the two poles in the spectrum of analysis.

Government policy as a response to public pressure

The main proponent of the idea that Australia’s intervention in East Timor was forced by domestic pressure is Fernandes. For Fernandes there is absolute

---

123 Greenlees and Garran, Deliverance, pp. 260-261.
124 This dichotomy has also been identified in somewhat different terms by White, ‘The road to INTERFET,’ p. 85.
126 He is the only author to argue this position in a book length work, in Fernandes, Reluctant saviour. See also Clinton Fernandes, ‘The road to INTERFET: Bringing the politics back in,’ Security
consistency in Australia’s policy on East Timor from 1975 through to 1999. At all times the aim was to prevent Timorese independence and placate Indonesia. From 1998 until the 1999 ballot and its aftermath,

Australian diplomacy functioned in support of the Indonesian strategy all along. It functioned as an obstacle to East Timor’s independence. When the Howard government was eventually forced to send in a peacekeeping force, it did so under the pressure of a tidal wave of public outrage.¹²⁷

In Fernandes’ view the Australian government never wanted a ballot to take place, they deliberately helped Indonesia undermine the eventual ballot, and they did not want to deploy Australian troops in East Timor. The circuit breaker in this position was mass popular pressure, both in East Timor and, more importantly, in Australia.

Fernandes employs a Left-wing populist critique of Australian politics, in which an elite group of policy makers and intellectuals determines government policy in ways which are conducive to the interests of Australian capitalism, but are not necessarily in the interests of, or supported by, the ‘Australian public’ in general. In relation to Indonesia, elite opinion has long been dominated by the ‘Jakarta lobby’, a group which

is composed of state managers who carry out the policy of support for the Indonesian military, and academics and commentators who defend this policy in public.¹²⁸

In contrast to some more conspiratorial versions of this idea, Fernandes argues that the lobby acts in ‘convergence’ with the Australia’s so-called ‘national interest’ in Indonesia (see Chapter Two).¹²⁹

The result has been that from the Whitlam government onwards, Australia has prioritised maintaining good relations with Indonesia over any other aspect of the East Timor issue. This has included ‘neutralising’ negative public opinion in Australia, and aiding Indonesia in the diplomatic sphere.¹³⁰

---

¹²⁷ Fernandes, *Reluctant saviour*, p. 3.
¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 23.
¹²⁹ Ibid.
¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 12-18.
From 1998, however, this stance was complicated by the political crisis in Indonesia and the upsurge of political struggle in East Timor, which Fernandes emphasises as a major reason for Habibie shifting Indonesian policy. Undeterred, Howard was absolutely determined to maintain the status quo in East Timor. The suggestion of the New Caledonia model was merely a stalling tactic, with the promise of an eventual ballot on independence not to be taken seriously. Although Habibie’s subsequent decision to grant a ballot undermined this manoeuvre, Australia continued to do all it could to prevent independence. Here, Fernandes goes beyond the widespread view that Australia prioritised good relations with Indonesia over an insistence on adequate security arrangements for the ballot, as discussed above. Instead, he suggests that the Australian government deliberately gave diplomatic cover to Indonesia’s campaign of terror, because they wanted Indonesia to succeed in engineering a result favouring autonomy.

Even when the ballot clearly favoured independence, Indonesia thought that the result could be reversed by creating ‘new demographic facts on the ground’, in other words ‘ethnic cleansing’. Howard and Downer were complicit in these actions by withdrawing foreign observers, and then by refusing to intervene militarily. Indeed, they ridiculed anyone suggesting such a course of action, disingenuously labeling any troop deployment as an ‘invasion’ of Indonesia, although they themselves had recently supported the actual invasion of Kosovo. Fernandes goes so far as to say, then, that the Australian government was prepared to actively aid attempted genocide in order to see Indonesia retain control over East Timor.

These plans were thwarted by mass political action taken in Australia by supporters of East Timorese independence. Fernandes details the protest movement which called for the Australian government to send troops into East Timor, of which there were two main components. The first was a series of street rallies, starting on September 6th when several hundred protested in Sydney. The largest protest was, according to Fernandes, around 20 to 30,000 people strong, again in Sydney, on September 11th. Such actions were organised by Left-wing activist groups, trade

131 Ibid., pp. 33-36.
132 Ibid., pp. 39-40.
133 Ibid., pp. 47-48.
134 Ibid., pp. 78-79, 114.
135 Ibid., pp. 77, 83-85.
136 Ibid., pp. 88-95.
unions, churches and the human rights organisation, Amnesty International. The second component of the campaign was a series of bans imposed by trade unions, aimed at imposing financial pain on Indonesia. These included disruptions to the operations of Indonesia’s Garuda Airlines, the refusal of dock workers to handle cargo bound to or from Indonesia, and threats against companies who imported materials from Indonesia such as oil or paper. Indonesian diplomatic missions and businesses in Australia were also targeted, with bans on garbage collection, mail delivery and the like.

Fernandes seems unclear as to whether the demand of the movement was for the immediate deployment of Australian troops with or without Indonesian acceptance, or rather for the Australian government to increase diplomatic pressure on Indonesia to allow a peacekeeping force. But in any case, the protests aimed at reversing the perceived Australian support for Indonesia. It was not only the immediate impact of this campaign which affected government policy, but also the ‘forward trajectory of protests’, which threatened to increase rapidly in size. Ultimately, the government had to give way to the mass movement:

[The troops] were not sent in because of the goodwill of the Australian government, but because of massive protests that increased rapidly in both size and fury. Protests such as these, which threaten even more serious action, are significant to politicians, because they signal deep and wide support within the broader community that has been created over many years.

In addition to Fernandes’ lengthy discussion, there are several other less developed analyses from left-wing academics which broadly agree with his position. Burchill adds the idea that Howard was seeking policy differentiation from Labor’s position on Indonesia, but also maintains that he ‘was overwhelmed with demands for a military response to the slaughter.’ Journalist John Martinkus likewise argues that

Public opinion in Australia had demanded that something finally had to be done to stop the destruction and the killing and, with the result of the ballot so clear, the government was not in a position to ignore it.

---

137 Compare, for example Ibid., pp. 85, 88.
138 Ibid., p. 94.
139 Ibid., pp. 113-114.
140 Burchill, ‘East Timor, Australia and Indonesia,’ p. 181.
141 In his book derived mainly from reports written from within East Timor, Martinkus, A dirty little war, p. 348. For further examples, see Noam Chomsky, A new generation draws the line: Kosovo,
Fernandes’ thesis has not surprisingly proved popular with activists engaged with the East Timor question, as it gives primacy to their efforts not only immediately after the ballot, but also during the entire period of the Indonesian occupation. It also legitimates the unusual actions of broadly Left-wing activists actively seeking a more aggressive Australian foreign and military policy, when in general such groups tend to be critical of Australian military deployments overseas.

The moral imperative for intervention

Most mainstream academics have had a far more positive view of the role of the Australian state in the East Timor issue than Fernandes. The common thread in these works is that by intervening in East Timor, Australia was acting in accordance with universal moral norms, and that this was of itself sufficient motivation for intervention. This moral imperative is considered self-evident and ahistorical; how and why morality came to be so decisive in world affairs is not explained.

This is the case even where the authors are critical of certain aspects of the Australian government’s policy, in particular the handling of the situation before the ballot. For example, some writers bemoan the inadequacy of the initial reaction of the international community, but see the eventual intervention in East Timor as a policy at last driven by moral concerns. The deployment thus fits into a pattern of post-Cold War ‘humanitarian interventions’, such as the US led operation in Kosovo, which are driven by the view that ‘something must be done’.

---


*For example, see the favourable review in Green Left Weekly*, the newspaper of the Left-wing party which played the most prominent role in the East Timor campaign in Australia; Vanessa Hearman, ‘Timor: Australia’s real role,’ *Green Left Weekly* (online), 20 October, 2004. A party journal also argued a similar position to Fernandes’; Terry Townsend, *The left and UN military intervention in East Timor*, Democratic Socialist Party, 2000 (accessed 29.05.07, http://www.dsp.org.au/links/). Support for Fernandes’ position has also been expressed to the author by a number of East Timor solidarity activists.

The less critical analyses based on moral imperatives actually serve to naturalise the government’s actions, by presenting them as the inevitable outcome of moral outrage over the situation within East Timor. For example, Chalk approvingly cites a US State Department official as saying ‘There is a massacre quotient above which some sort of involvement inevitably has to occur.’\textsuperscript{144} The obvious support of Indonesian forces in the violence ‘left Canberra little choice but to act’.\textsuperscript{145} While criticising the Howard government’s overall record on human rights, Kent writes that

the urgency and human horror of the Timor crisis, heightened by immediate popular outcry as well as a sense of real and present danger, galvanized the government into action…\textsuperscript{146}

In doing so, the Howard government displayed ‘courage and resolve that placed it on a higher moral plane than its predecessors.’\textsuperscript{147}

The moral basis for Australia’s involvement is also stressed by the semi-official history of the East Timor policy published by DFAT, which gives the impression that concern for the well-being of the East Timorese population was Australia’s motivation throughout 1999, but particularly after the announcement of the ballot results. For example, it highlights Howard’s ‘shock and distress’ about the post-ballot violence, and ‘the determination of the international community not to abandon East Timor’.\textsuperscript{148} The inherent morality of his government’s policies is also maintained by Alexander Downer, who has written that ‘Australians can take considerable pride in how we responded to the historic challenge’ of East Timor, based on ‘the self-evident humanitarian nature of our actions in 1999.’\textsuperscript{149}

This official position in which Australia appears wholly benevolent and farsighted is subjected to a sustained critique by Cotton.\textsuperscript{150} And yet Cotton himself, one of Australia’s foremost scholars in the realist tradition, actually presents the most sophisticated elaboration of the position that the government was motivated by moral

\textsuperscript{144} Peter Chalk, \textit{Australian foreign and defence policy in the wake of the 1999/2000 East Timor intervention}, Santa Monica, RAND, 2001, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid. See also Peter Chalk, ‘Australia and Indonesia: Rebuilding relations after East Timor,’ \textit{Contemporary Southeast Asia} 23, no. 2 (2001).
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., p. 276.
\textsuperscript{149} Downer, ‘East Timor: Looking back on 1999,’ p. 8.
\textsuperscript{150} Cotton, \textit{East Timor, Australia and Regional Order}, pp. 110-124.
concerns in East Timor.\textsuperscript{151} Cotton avoids the oversimplification of other accounts which stress moral factors, and at one point argues that

\begin{quote}
upon examination the Timor case is profoundly ambiguous, with humanitarian questions at best serving as a trigger for addressing international and regional issues of longer standing.\textsuperscript{152}
\end{quote}

After all, the violence in 1999 was not nearly as severe as that suffered by the East Timorese immediately following Indonesia’s invasion. Moreover, as noted in Chapter Two, Cotton gives a nuanced account of Australia’s national interests in the Timor issue going back to 1975, in the context of the wider relation with Indonesia. He stresses that concerns over self-determination for the East Timorese were consistently subordinated to Australia’s strategic interest in geopolitical stability throughout the Indonesian archipelago.\textsuperscript{153} Cotton is also quite critical of Australia’s handling of the then ongoing negotiations with independent East Timor over the Timor Gap oil reserves. Australia’s hard-line pursuit of its own ‘national interest’ in these negotiations leads him to conclude that ‘the former altruistic approach to East Timor appears to have been eclipsed through the application of a narrowly pragmatic calculus’.\textsuperscript{154}

His critical approach to Australia’s record, however, leaves Cotton with the difficulty of explaining the policy change in September 1999. He does discuss some important national interests which were served by intervention. For example, he traces the failure of Indonesia’s East Timor policy in achieving regional stability.\textsuperscript{155} He also notes that Australia, the US and the United Nations all saw that Indonesia’s political crisis provided an opportunity to find a lasting solution in East Timor, but at the same time the resulting political unrest in Timor threatened further regional destabilisation.\textsuperscript{156}

But Australia’s continued support for Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor up until late 1998 means that the subsequent bold action to secure East Timor’s

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{152} Cotton, \textit{East Timor, Australia and Regional Order}, p. 71.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., pp. 22-46.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., pp. 102-109.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., pp. 49-58.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., pp. 75-78, 89-91.
\end{flushright}
independence remains something of a riddle. In contrast to Fernandes, however, Cotton gives almost no weight to domestic political pressure in instituting this break in policy. Instead, he appeals to the triumph of the Australian conscience:

while the public-opinion factor was undoubtedly important, behind these objectives lay other goals and calculations, and measured against these less public objectives, Australian policy is at least more explicable, if not more obviously successful. The most important – indeed a factor that is hard to overemphasize – was the assuaging of Australian guilt for the long complicity in Jakarta’s policy of repression and integration.

Cotton does partially historicise this sudden idealism, linking it to a ‘new self-belief, probably excessive and evanescent, in the resilience and value of Australia’s institutions and values’, due to Australia’s survival of the Asian economic crisis. But this critique of the interplay between international politics and moral factors is not developed further. Instead we are left with the analysis that ‘a growing awareness of the bad faith of the past touched the national conscience and was perhaps the key to what is otherwise a surprising and radical policy innovation.’

Despite their differences and criticisms, mainstream academic accounts of the deployment thus accord moral factors a far greater weight in explaining government decision making than is normal in the study of international relations. This is perhaps not surprising for liberal writers, as the Timor deployment can be seen from this perspective as an example of a state acting in an unusually appropriate manner. It is more notable that there are no in-depth realist accounts of the Timor deployment, in the sense of explaining it as part of an Australian realpolitik. Such an analysis certainly seems feasible, and Dupont, White and Ryan have all written accounts which have briefly suggested how it might proceed, without developing the position fully.

---

157 Ibid., pp. 78-79.
158 Ibid., p. 100.
159 Ibid.
160 Ibid., p. 79.
161 Alan Dupont, ‘The strategic implications of an independent East Timor,’ in Out of the ashes: Destruction and reconstruction of East Timor, ed. James Fox and Dionisio Babo Soares, Canberra, ANU E Press, 2003; Ryan, ‘Primary responsibilities and primary risks,’ pp. 31-33; White, ‘The road to INTERFET.’
The limited terms of the current debate

So far, existing explanations for the Australian decision to intervene in East Timor have been analysed as revolving around the two ideas either of popular pressure on the government, or of the inherent moral imperatives with which it was faced. However these two positions should not be seen as diametrically opposed, and in fact some accounts combine the two. The result is a more explicit nationalist standpoint than Fernandes’ radical populism, in which popular pressure forced the government to act in accordance with what the Australian nation always stood for at heart.

For example, Lamb accepts Fernandes’ account of popular support to deploy troops, but rejects how the latter has ‘framed his analysis in terms of ‘us’ versus ‘them’’, and argues that the intervention was ‘Australia itself actually doing what is required of a functioning democracy, albeit momentarily.’\(^\text{162}\) In similar fashion, Maley suggests that it was the insular DFAT bureaucracy which really failed to take into account the ‘Popular fury’ over the post-ballot violence, rather than the Howard government, whose ‘broad objections were both commendable and honorable.’\(^\text{163}\) Taylor argues that it was not only popular pressure which led to the intervention, but also the fact that there was among policy makers

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{an emerging consensus that the Indonesian army had overstepped the limits,} \\
\text{and that human rights concerns and recognition of the outcome of the ‘free and fair’ referendum should… override… economic, political and strategic ties with the Indonesian regime.}^{164}
\end{align*}
\]

Likewise, Taudevin sees popular pressure as forcing policy to align with what had always been the ‘moral stance’, given that East Timor ‘has cried out for intervention since 1975.’\(^\text{165}\)

This sort of analysis points to a commonality between the ‘popular pressure’ and ‘moral imperative’ theses. To a greater or lesser degree, the authors discussed all see Australia’s 1999 intervention in East Timor as an event occurring outside of the normal workings of Australian foreign policy, or that it represents a fundamental disjuncture with earlier (and later) policy. At the same time, none of the analyses are

\(^{165}\) Taudevin, East Timor: Too little too late, pp. 2-5.
fully integrated with an analysis of Australia’s overall foreign policy goals in Southeast Asia, or with the wider political changes occurring within Indonesia. Instead, government policy is seen only as a response to the immediate humanitarian crisis which unfolded in East Timor in September 1999. As a result of these abstractions, the Australian intervention only becomes understandable by reference to a force outside of the normal processes of international politics. Be it public pressure or inherent morality, this force arrives \textit{deus ex machina}, resulting in a previously inconceivable course of action from the Australian government.

At one level, of course, the Timor intervention was an extraordinary event in Australian foreign policy, and represented a break from previous positions. But if only the novel aspects of the immediate intervention are considered, deeper continuities with the pattern of Australia’s historical policy are obscured. By critically examining the two main existing explanations for the intervention, the rest of the thesis suggests how such continuities point to a consistent pattern of Australian imperialism regarding East Timor.

4. Explaining Australia’s intervention: Towards a critique

The existing explanations of Australian policy are not only limited in scope. Ultimately, they are not tenable even on their own terms. The following discussion mainly critiques Fernandes’ argument that popular pressure forced the Australian government to intervene in East Timor. Some \textit{prima facie} criticisms of the moral imperative argument are also offered here, although a full assessment will only be made in Chapter Six, after the nature of the intervention itself has been considered.

\textit{Was Howard forced to intervene in East Timor?}

There is no doubt that there was overwhelming popular support for Australia’s military intervention in East Timor. Passive support at least was shown in an opinion poll published on September 12\textsuperscript{th}, which recorded 77\% of respondents in favour of Australian troops forming part of an international force in East Timor, and only 15\% opposed. Support was nearly as strong among Coalition voters as Labor supporters.\textsuperscript{166} But more important was the active movement for intervention in

Timor, which mobilised thousands of people in street demonstrations and in workplace actions. Fernandes only explicitly cites demonstrations in Sydney on September 6th, 8th and 11th, the last of which he estimates involved between 20,000 to 30,000 people. However, there were numerous other protests around the country over the course of this week, the largest of which was a rally of 25,000 people in Melbourne on the 10th. Other examples included: a picket of the Indonesian embassy in Canberra involving up to 500 people on the 7th; a crowd which threw stones at the Indonesian consulate in Darwin on the 8th; and a protest involving hundreds in Brisbane on the 10th.

The involvement of the organised labour movement in particular added political weight to the campaign, not only through support for public rallies but also through industrial bans, which are potentially far harder for decision makers to ignore than largely symbolic street protests. Union action included interrupting communications at Indonesian diplomatic missions, disruptions to the Indonesian airline Garuda, threats to Australian companies not to use Indonesian products such as crude oil, and bans on handling cargo being transported to or from Indonesia. Moreover, press attention helped build up a general sentiment that Australia should play a role in bringing peace to East Timor, well before the protest movement began.

The result was ‘great public concern, and strong public expectations that the government would ‘do something’.’ The overwhelming popular support for intervention in 1999 was built upon the foundation laid by years of activism by a much smaller number of people working in the East Timor solidarity campaign. This activism ensured that the East Timor issue never entirely faded from public attention, a point to which Chapter Six returns. Certainly, such strong levels of popular support must be taken into account by any politician in a liberal democracy, and there would undoubtedly have been a political price to pay if the government had simply allowed

---

171 White, ‘The road to INTERFET,’ p. 81.
events in East Timor to run their course. By mid-September, the intervention was
Howard’s easiest option to take in terms of domestic politics. Public pressure, then,
should be considered an additional, supporting factor in the decision to intervene.
The Howard government in turn also used the popularity of its intervention for its
own domestic political purposes, as will be discussed in Chapters Six and Seven.

The popular pressure theory, however, argues far more than this, particularly in its
strongest version put forward by Fernandes. It argues that popular pressure was the
deciding factor in forcing Howard to enact a policy to which he remained
opposed. In assessing this position, both the strength of the popular campaign and
the timing of its impact in relation to key policy decisions need to be considered.

Fernandes overstates the impact that the campaign for intervention could have had in
the short term, given its size and nature. The rapid mobilisation of tens of thousands
of people in a short space of time was a substantial achievement, and compares
favourably to many protest campaigns in recent years in Australia. However, a
comparison with two subsequent protest movements, against the war in Iraq and the
‘WorkChoices’ industrial relations scheme, is less flattering. A comparison with
these campaigns cannot give an absolutely definitive conclusion as to the
effectiveness of popular demands for intervention in East Timor, given the differing
issues and very complex policy considerations in all three cases. But it does provide
a framework for a necessary assessment of the campaign, the strength of which is
overestimated by Fernandes.

In the sphere of international relations, the 2003 campaign against an invasion of Iraq
brought hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets in cities around Australia,
joining millions more overseas. The biggest street marches were estimated at
150,000 people in Melbourne and 200,000 in Sydney between March 15th and 16th, at
that time the largest protests ever seen in Australia. As with the campaign for
intervention in Timor, there was support from many groups, notably the union
movement and churches. On the eve of the war, an opinion poll indicated that 68% of

---

172 See Fernandes, Reluctant saviour, p. 114.
173 Valerie Lawson, ‘With one voice, the world says no,’ The Age, 17 February 2003, p. 1.
respondents were against Australian involvement in an invasion of Iraq which did not have UN approval.\textsuperscript{174}

Trade union bans gave the campaign for intervention in East Timor a substance that was lacking in protests against the Iraq War. But this union pressure also had limitations. Its targets were primarily Indonesian, not Australian economic interests, with the exception of delaying Australian cargo being shipped to Indonesia.\textsuperscript{175} This sort of action may have had an effect in convincing Indonesia of its international isolation, but it didn’t place direct pressure on the Australian government, because it didn’t seriously threaten Australian companies. For example, the Transport Workers Union balked at bans on refueling Garuda aeroplanes because of potential retaliation against Qantas in Indonesia.\textsuperscript{176} Maintaining that ‘This protest action is not intended to harm the oil companies’, the Australian Workers Union only demanded that Australian refineries not import supplies of crude oil from Indonesia, meaning the companies’ operations were barely affected.\textsuperscript{177}

Moreover, it can take very substantial industrial action to dissuade a government against a policy which it sees as vital to its interests, as shown in the union movement’s campaign against the so-called ‘WorkChoices’ industrial relations legislation, implemented by the Howard government from March 2006. Again, this movement mobilised hundreds of thousands of people over a period of more than two years. While there was no consistent, nation-wide industrial action against WorkChoices, even the effect of workers attending mass rallies during work-time had a bigger impact on Australian economic interests than the Timor campaign. For example, it is estimated that workers attending a rally on November 15\textsuperscript{th} 2005 cost employers in Victoria alone A$30 million, including losses of A$20 million for car manufacturers.\textsuperscript{178}

Fernandes argues that the potential for the movement to grow was also a major factor in prompting the government’s reversal of policy. But it is hard to see how the

\textsuperscript{175} And even in this case the union did its best to ‘not unduly hurt local companies’. Norrington, ‘Protests start with ships.’
\textsuperscript{176} Brad Norrington, ‘Patchy response to industrial offensive,’ \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald}, 9 September 1999, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{177} ‘Boycott call as hunger strike starts,’ \textit{The Australian}, 10 September 1999, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{178} Paul Robinson, ‘Not happy, Mr Howard! Record crowds rally against work laws,’ \textit{The Age}, 16 November 2005, p. 1.
campaign for intervention in East Timor had more potential than either of these two other subsequent campaigns. In both these later cases Howard showed himself to be a determined politician who was not afraid to defy both public opinion and sizeable social mobilisations. In the case of the Iraq War, Howard correctly judged that he could weather the public outcry. He also persevered with the WorkChoices policy, even though its unpopularity was such that it played a major part in Labor’s electoral victory late in 2007.

The timing of the government’s decision also presents a problem for Fernandes’ thesis. It is clear that by September 7\textsuperscript{th}, at the very latest, the National Security Committee had decided that Australia should take the leading role in a UN intervention. In fact, if government accounts are to be taken at face value, Howard told UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan that Australia was prepared to lead an international peacekeeping force on the 6\textsuperscript{th}, and on the same day he also urged Habibie to accept such a force.\footnote{East Timor in Transition 1998-2000, pp. 128, 133.} As already discussed, military planning for the operation began on the 5\textsuperscript{th}.

However, according to Fernandes the first ‘serious protest action’ in favour of intervention itself only took place on September 6\textsuperscript{th}, and mobilised ‘several hundred’ people.\footnote{Fernandes, Reluctant saviour, pp. 88-89.} The largest protest Fernandes cites, and on which he bases much of his argument for a huge groundswell of public opinion, took place on September 11\textsuperscript{th},\footnote{Ibid.} several days after the decision to intervene was made. Nonetheless, he claims that by the 7\textsuperscript{th} ‘Panic had begun to take hold’ within the government, because of the popular campaign.\footnote{Ibid., p. 95.}

It might be still be argued that while officially Howard was preparing the way for an intervention, in practice no real efforts were being made, and it was the protest movement which forced genuine action. This would be a tenuous proposition, at the very best. It would mean that the position presented by the government in public and in diplomatic channels was merely a charade, but that public pressure then forced policy action which seems to conform to these earlier public statements.

\footnote{East Timor in Transition 1998-2000, pp. 128, 133.}
\footnote{Fernandes, Reluctant saviour, pp. 88-89.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid., p. 95.}
The ‘elite’ turns against the old policy consensus

In an odd way, then, the government and the popular campaign were working in concert from around September 6th or 7th. While some on the fringe of the movement may actually have wanted an Australian invasion of East Timor regardless of Indonesian opposition, most agreed with Howard that Indonesia needed to accept any intervention. The government was not moving as quickly or aggressively as many in the popular movement would have liked to put diplomatic pressure on Indonesia. But it was working to achieve precisely what the campaign was demanding.

Public anger over events in Timor was fostered and channeled into protest not only by groups such as unions and churches, but also by the mainstream press. The tabloid Herald-Sun listed contact details for Indonesian diplomatic missions so that readers would know where to lodge protests, while The Australian published a ‘protest diary’, an extraordinary move for a newspaper whose senior journalists were a key part of the ‘Jakarta lobby’, and which had criticised public protests against Indonesian policy in the past. As Tiffen has discussed, media coverage also tended towards melodrama in emphasising the sheer brutality of the Indonesian campaign. Headlines proclaimed ‘Refugees herded into exile’, ‘Massacre in church haven’ and ‘Police station piled with dead’, the latter article containing reports of thousands of corpses ‘dripping blood’. Such reporting could only serve to fuel popular anger.

As already discussed, the shift in media attitudes towards support for an independent East Timor had begun early in 1997. The ballot and subsequent violence saw the completion of this change, as media and popular opinion converged in a new consensus on Timor. By the time of the intervention, there were very few people

---

183 As Fernandes himself argues at one point, Ibid., p. 85.
184 Although many who supported intervention evidently thought Howard was moving fast enough; the same poll which showed massive support for intervention indicated that 45% of people thought the Australian government was doing enough to help East Timor, while 41% thought it should do more. Opinion polling on East Timor.
185 ‘How to protest,’ Herald Sun, 10 September 1999, p. 7; ‘Protest diary,’ The Australian, 11 September 1999, p. 3.
187 ‘Massacre in church haven,’ The Australian, 8 September 1999, p. 2; Lindsay Murdoch and Craig Skehan, ‘Police station piled with dead,’ The Age, 11 September 1999, p. 19; Sian Powell, ‘Refugees herded into exile,’ The Australian, 8 September 1999, p. 2.
who were publicly against the idea. Instead, once it was announced that Habibie was willing to accept a peacekeeping force, the press was unanimous in praising Howard for rescuing a bad situation.\textsuperscript{189} Criticisms remained over the government’s earlier handling of the issue, and many commentators pointed out the difficulties involved for Australia, not least the certain damage that would be done to the relationship with Indonesia. But this was generally seen as unavoidable, given the compelling situation in East Timor. There were still hard-line members of the Jakarta lobby who thought the intervention a mistake, but these voices were now few and isolated.\textsuperscript{190}

Examples of the general support for intervention could be multiplied, but the shift can best be illustrated by the comments in \textit{The Australian}, home to Australia’s leading Right-wing foreign affairs commentators, and previously a bastion of support for the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. In January, commenting on the public announcement of Howard’s letter to Habibie, the paper not only editorialised that a change in East Timor’s situation was inevitable, but that the Australian government must accept a vote on self-determination which ‘might well favour independence’.\textsuperscript{191}

By the time of the ballot, Sheridan went so far as to say that independence in East Timor was preferable to the current situation of instability.\textsuperscript{192} Regarding Australian involvement in peacekeeping, Paul Kelly could (approvingly) predict in March that

If there is a descent into violence in East Timor in coming months, then you can be sure of one thing: Australian troops won’t be sent there to separate the combatants and impose a peace.\textsuperscript{193}

But on September 4\textsuperscript{th}, even before the announcement of the ballot results, both Kelly and Sheridan threw their support behind an Australian intervention, Kelly writing that ‘Australia is preparing for its troop involvement as part of a UN peacekeeping force in East Timor and it should be sooner rather than later.’\textsuperscript{194}


\textsuperscript{192} Greg Sheridan, ‘Why US forces won’t get the nod,’ \textit{The Australian}, 1 September 1999, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{193} Paul Kelly, ‘East Timor - it’s not our fight to join,’ \textit{The Australian}, 17 March 1999, p. 13.

\textsuperscript{194} Paul Kelly, ‘We can help if Jakarta lets us,’ \textit{The Australian}, 4 September 1999, p. 13; Greg Sheridan, ‘Time for us to send in peacekeepers,’ \textit{The Australian}, 4 September 1999, p. 13.
Of course, the government of the day does not simply follow the prescriptions of leading media commentators. And in turn, the media itself is influenced to some extent by the views of its audience, which overwhelmingly favoured intervention. But nor do commentators like Sheridan and Kelly simply follow mass popular opinion; to some extent they influence the debate among those who are influential in policy making, and in turn reflect changes in the policy consensus. In this sense it is revealing that the ideological forces Fernandes correctly identifies as previously bolstering support for the Indonesian occupation, when they were contemptuous towards general public opinion, had now come to support intervention. Media pressure and general public opinion in favour of intervention was thus in part a reflection of the changing policy consensus on East Timor, and not simply an independent factor affecting decision making.

This brings into question another aspect of Fernandes’ argument, which is that the government did not want to send a peacekeeping force to East Timor, because it preferred an ongoing Indonesian occupation. He argues that this has always been the policy favoured by the elite in Australia. But elite institutions and figures were now part of the massive support for Australian intervention in East Timor. Moreover, the government’s actions did follow the new consensus, although at times with a time lag. This is again a problem of fetishising certain aspects of policy making, of mistaking the means of that policy for the end, as identified in Chapter Two. In a time of upheaval, policy strategies which previously seemed immutable can be quickly abandoned, without the underlying aims of that policy necessarily changing.

As we have seen, Howard and Downer gradually came to accept, albeit regretfully, that a new settlement was unavoidable in East Timor, that this might result in independence, and that Australia might even play a role in bringing it about. Accordingly, the government made preparations for possible Australian involvement in a peacekeeping force, although these were inadequate due to concerns over the relationship with Indonesia. By the beginning of September 1999, Australia’s once immutable opposition to East Timorese independence had been whittled away, and with it the prime reason to reject Australian military intervention. On the contrary, as will be discussed in Chapter Six, there were now important national interests at stake for Australia which could only be achieved precisely through intervention.
Prima face considerations on the moral imperative for intervention

The overwhelming public support for Australian intervention gives some ‘common sense’ backing to the idea that the policy resulted from moral concerns. There can be no doubt that most people who supported the intervention did so out of concerns for the wellbeing of the East Timorese. Without critical comment, it could be seen as simply ‘the right thing to do’. This is precisely what enables an explanation based on moral imperatives to naturalise Australia’s intervention in East Timor. Moral motives for any specific foreign policy are not, in general, able to be disproved in any positivist sense. It is certainly not the contention here that policy makers were not ‘genuine’ in their response to the post-ballot violence in East Timor; this issue is irrelevant for understanding the underlying structure of Australia’s foreign relations.

A critical examination of a supposedly humanitarian foreign policy must instead seek to problematise the very idea that a moralistic foreign policy can be taken at face value. In his discussion of the Kosovo intervention, Chomsky notes that the ‘new humanitarianism’ is seen as a return to the ‘true’, moral basis of the Western powers, from which deviations in the past were mistakes, or were compelled by Cold War circumstances.\(^{195}\) A critique of humanitarianism must therefore ask; ‘Is the resort to force undertaken ‘in the name of principles and values,’ as professed? Or are we witnessing something more crass and familiar?\(^{196}\) It must judge claims of humanitarian motives against the historical pattern of the nation’s foreign policy.

For those who see Australia’s policy in September 1999 as driven by morality, the immediate difficulty is that the intervention becomes a tranquil desert island in a stormy sea of realpolitik.\(^{197}\) As discussed in Chapter Two, Australia showed complete disregard for humanitarian concerns in relation to East Timor from 1975 to 1999, the deaths of perhaps 200,000 East Timorese notwithstanding. Certainly, from the end of the Cold War the discourse of ‘human rights’ took on a new importance in the West’s relations with Indonesia. But, as noted in the previous chapter, this was not out of altruism, but rather advanced the West’s own economic and political interests. We have also seen how, in the lead-up to the ballot in 1999, Australia’s


\(^{197}\) Cotton’s account at least acknowledges these difficulties, but they are left unaddressed.
supposed humanitarian concerns were often given second priority behind the need to manage the relationship with Indonesia. Moreover, as will be discussed in the following chapter, Australia’s relations with post-independence East Timor have again been driven by realist conceptions of Australia’s national interest.

Australia’s humanitarian motives in September 1999 are by no means ‘self-evident’. On the contrary, based purely on the historical record, we would expect morality to be an irrelevancy, or even an impediment, to foreign policy makers. However, a complete assessment needs to take into account the nature of Australia’s military intervention on the ground in East Timor, as well as international efforts to reconstruct the newly independent nation. As such, Chapter Five assesses the humanitarian accomplishments of the intervention in detail, and in doing so suggests that Australia was in fact motivated by longstanding strategic concerns.
Chapter Five

Australia’s intervention in East Timor

Within days of Indonesia’s decision to allow the deployment of international peacekeeping forces to East Timor, a multinational force was deploying in Dili. As they gradually assumed control over the entire territory, the dramatic narrative of Australian troops battling Indonesian militias captured the media’s attention. Likewise, subsequent analysis of the deployment has generally seen it as an outstanding success from a military point of view. Such accounts, however, ignore the political aspects of the deployment, an examination of which can provide insights into the original motivations for launching the intervention.

Accordingly, after briefly describing the military operation, this chapter goes on to consider how Australia used the deployment to secure its long term strategic interests in both East Timor and Indonesia. The second half of the chapter examines the efforts of the international community to rebuild East Timor, as well as Australia’s role as a post-colonial power in the world’s newest nation, which again provides an opportunity to assess the humanitarian motives of the Howard government.

1. The conduct of Australia’s military intervention in East Timor

Australian military operations, September 1999 to February 2000

Although Interfet (International Force for East Timor) was technically an international mission conducted under a United Nations (UN) mandate, at its core it was an operation of the Australian Defence Force.¹ Australia planned, organised and

¹ The following account is based primarily on Bob Breen, Mission accomplished, East Timor: The Australian Defence Force participation in the International Forces East Timor (INTERFET), Crows Nest, Allen & Unwin, 2000; Alan Ryan, “Primary responsibilities and primary risks”: Australian Defence Force participation in the International Force East Timor, Study Paper no. 304, Land Warfare Studies Centre, 2005
commanded the deployment, and provided the bulk of combat troops. As such, it was the largest Australian military deployment since the Vietnam War, and it was the first time that Australia had led an international military deployment of such magnitude.

It was not, however, the bloodbath that some had feared. Interfet commander Major General Peter Cosgrove arrived in Dili with some of his subordinate officers on September 19th, the day before the first deployment of combat troops. He made contact with Major General Kiki Syahnakrie, the Indonesian commander in East Timor, and they began to co-ordinate the movements of their two forces in and out of Dili. If relations were not exactly cordial they were at least workable. Cosgrove later said of his Indonesian counterpart that ‘he seemed to want to avoid the same sorts of disasters that I did and I felt then and throughout that he was a man I could deal with.’

At dawn on September 20th, Interfet’s main force began to arrive at Dili’s airport. Although Indonesia was co-operating with the deployment, the Australian strategy was to build up rapidly a significant combat capability, and to maintain overwhelmingly superior firepower wherever they went within East Timor. In the first 24 hours, aircraft delivered hundreds of troops, including contingents from Australia, New Zealand and Britain. They immediately secured the airport and harbour. On September 21st, Australian ships landed additional forces at Dili harbour, and further sites around Dili were occupied. By the end of September, there were over 4,200 Interfet soldiers in East Timor, as well as dozens of armoured vehicles and a number of utility helicopters.

Even as Interfet forces were still arriving, Indonesian army and police units were evacuating Dili. For the most part, they left in an orderly fashion. However, for days after Interfet landed, militia and elements of the TNI (Indonesian Armed Forces) continued to roam the city, looting, burning and looking for any remaining civilians. Australian forces launched a major security operation across Dili on September 24th, raiding the headquarters of the local militia and greatly reducing the freedom of movement of any remaining militiamen. Nonetheless, acts of arson continued, as

---

2 Cited in Ryan, ‘Primary responsibilities and primary risks,’ p. 69.
3 Breen, Mission accomplished, pp. 31-43; Ryan, ‘Primary responsibilities and primary risks,’ pp. 69-70, 132.
TNI personnel were still permitted to move around the city. General Syahnakrie formally handed over control of East Timor to Cosgrove on September 27th. Only a small number of Indonesian personnel remained in Dili, but they retained their responsibility for the security of some locations such as the power station, fuel storage facility and telecommunications centre. The last Indonesian forces left on October 31st.

However, while officially in control of East Timor, in practice Interfet had no presence in the bulk of the territory. Rather than attempting to establish an immediate but smaller scale presence at multiple locations throughout the territory, Cosgrove followed what has been described as an ‘oil spot’ strategy, in which overwhelming force was built up in centralised locations. Only when one location could be permanently and completely secured did Interfet forces gradually spread into the surrounding area, or begin the process of buildup in another location. Baucau airport, east of Dili, was secured on September 22nd, but Australian forces did not enter the town proper. Other than this, Interfet initially only deployed outside of Dili in temporary raids. Using the mobility afforded by their helicopters and armoured vehicles, Australian forces were on occasion able to take militia forces by surprise, driving them off or capturing them without casualties on either side.

The first towns outside of Dili to be permanently occupied by Interfet were Liquica on September 27th, and Baucau and Los Palos on October 3rd and 4th respectively. Next, a major operation was launched to the west of Dili, which secured the border with West Timor, as well as the areas within East Timor in which the militias were strongest. Balibo was occupied on October 5th, followed by Maliana on the 10th and Suai on the 11th. Interfet’s last major deployment was to Oecussi, a small enclave in West Timor, on October 22nd. The final part of East Timor to be occupied was the island of Atauro, where there had been no major unrest, on November 21st.

From late November, the first civilian elements of UNTAET (United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor) arrived in Dili, and began to establish a

---

7 Ibid., pp. 63-70; Ryan, ‘Primary responsibilities and primary risks,’ pp. 73-74. The dates given here are when towns where considered fully secured, as given by Ryan, whereas Breen gives slightly earlier dates based on when Australian forces first entered the areas.
civilians administration for East Timor. They were followed in January 2000 by United Nations peacekeeping forces. A phased handover of security operations began, and total responsibility for military operations was transferred to UNTAET on February 23rd. UNTAET was more diverse in its contributing nations than Interfet, and included substantial numbers of Thai, South Korean and Philippine troops. However, while some Australian and New Zealand forces were now withdrawn from East Timor, those that remained continued in their key role of securing the western border with Indonesia.\(^8\)

**Resistance to Interfet**

A number of minor engagements notwithstanding, overall resistance to Interfet from the militias was unexpectedly light.\(^9\) There were concerns in the initial phases of the deployment that this would not be the case. Indonesian combat aircraft were stationed in West Timor and at times probed Interfet’s air defences, and Indonesian submarines and other warships likewise approached the Interfet flotilla.\(^10\) It seems likely, though, that these moves were posturing rather than serious preparations for an attack, given the international coalition’s vast advantages in any high level combat.

The real question was the extent to which the Indonesian military was prepared to use the militias to harass Interfet, and to continue operations against civilians inside East Timor. In the event, such activities were less than anticipated, and certainly did not match the militias’ threats before the deployment. Australian military action designed to neutralise militia power certainly played a role in this. But ultimately, the militias’ Indonesian masters decided it was not in their own interests to seriously challenge East Timor’s new status.

In the first two weeks of the deployment there were in fact no significant confrontations with militia forces, although Interfet troops did come under sporadic fire in Dili on September 23rd. There were some tense standoffs in Dili as militia elements evacuated along with groups of Indonesian regular soldiers. But in the first

---


phase of the deployment, the militias generally retreated as Interfet advanced, even avoiding reconnaissance patrols out of Dili.\textsuperscript{11} The major exception was an Australian raid to the town of Com in the far east of the island on September 26\textsuperscript{th}, where 24 militiamen were taken by surprise and captured without any shots being fired.\textsuperscript{12}

This relatively benign situation changed as Interfet moved to establish its presence in the militia heartland of western East Timor. The first major incident occurred on October 6\textsuperscript{th}, when Australian forces launched an operation to the town of Suai, a militia stronghold in the southwest of the territory. Over 100 militiamen were taken prisoner, and six were wounded. Having left Suai, the Interfet convey transporting the prisoners was then ambushed by militia. Up to four militiamen were killed, and two Australian soldiers were seriously wounded, Interfet’s first combat casualties.\textsuperscript{13} Three days later, British forces patrolling north of Suai were also ambushed, resulting in the death of one militiaman. On October 16\textsuperscript{th}, an Australian patrol near Atabae on the northwest coast was involved in a series of firefights, which resulted in four militiamen killed and another four wounded.

There may also have been other such confrontations which have not yet been made public. Kingsbury cites an unnamed Australian officer describing a clash in the Ermera district in late September, in which dozens of militiamen were shot by Australian forces, an incident not publicly acknowledged.\textsuperscript{14} Whatever their true extent, these militia actions did not seriously hamper Interfet’s advance along the border. For the most part the militias retreated into West Timor along with their Indonesian military sponsors.

As such, the militia forces remained largely intact, and a second phase of lower level militia activity began once Interfet had moved into position on the border with West Timor. On one occasion soon after the deployment to the border, an Interfet patrol was involved in a firefight with Indonesian regular forces, killing an Indonesian soldier. This incident resulted from genuine confusion over the precise location of the border between East and West Timor, and negotiations were initiated to prevent

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} See Breen, \textit{Mission accomplished}, pp. 54-55.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., pp. 56-57.
\item \textsuperscript{13} This is the account given in Ibid., p. 70. However Ryan states the Australian convey was ambushed ‘After escorting the detainees back to the border…’, presumably the border with West Timor. Ryan, ‘Primary responsibilities and primary risks,’ p. 132.
\end{itemize}
any further such occurrences. A more serious problem were a number raids from West Timor into Interfet controlled territory. These incursions were clearly not the work of ‘rogue elements’ outside the TNI’s control. By now many ‘militia’ personnel were in fact past or current members of the Indonesian special forces, and it is suspected that it was these elements who were responsible for many cross border raids. Their aim seems to have simply been to probe Interfet defences, and there were no major clashes. Again, though, the full extent of these actions is hard to gauge, as many seem not to have been made public.

Militia attacks and incursions drew an angry response from Australia and its allies. In early October, US Defence Secretary Cohen warned Indonesia to restrain the militias. To back up the threat, a United States marine taskforce was sent to East Timor in December, with a number of ‘humanitarian’ missions serving as pretext for a show of force by US troops. This led to a temporary reduction in incursions from West Timor from November 1999. An exception were incursions made into the enclave of Oecussi, including one raid of 50 militiamen on January 17th 2000, and another of around 100 the next day, the groups withdrawing to West Timor after light fighting resulted in one militiaman being killed.

In March 2000, incursions into East Timor proper suddenly resumed, and continued sporadically throughout that year, resulting in a number of dead militiamen and several injuries to Australian soldiers. In July a New Zealand soldier was killed in one such attack, prompting more Australian diplomatic pressure on Indonesia to halt the incursions. Militia activity again increased in late 2002, leading the UN to delay reductions of peacekeeping forces in the border region which had been planned for mid-2003. Nonetheless, in terms of Interfet and UNTAET’s overall ability to

15 Dickens, ‘The United Nations in East Timor: Intervention at the military operational level,’ pp. 221.
16 Kingsbury, ‘East Timor border security,’ p. 278.
17 Ibid., pp. 277-278.
18 Patrick Walters, ‘Cohen reads the riot act to military chief,’ The Australian, 1 October 1999, p. 8.
23 Although this activity also included commercially oriented smuggling by militias. See Kingsbury, ‘East Timor border security,’ pp. 279, 286-289.
secure East Timor, the ongoing cross border raids were not of great significance. In general, Indonesian political and military leaders were increasingly becoming reconciled to the loss of East Timor.

**Dealing with Falintil**

One aspect of the deployment which did not proceed smoothly was relations with Falintil (Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor), the East Timorese independence guerrilla army, which moved to fill the power vacuum left by the retreating Indonesian forces. Notwithstanding the official cantonment policy, there are a number of reports of increasingly large ‘liberated areas’ which were under the control of independence forces, especially in the east of the territory. Moreover, frustration with the pace of the Interfet deployment led some Falintil commanders, against orders, to lead offensive actions against those militia elements still terrorising civilians, or even against TNI and militia forces in the process of retreating to West Timor. 24 The Australian raid on Com in late September was prompted by a desire to forestall one such operation. 25 The guerillas refused point blank to be disarmed, with their field commander Taur Matan Ruak arguing that ‘Falintil will not give over weapons to Interfet because we are the national liberation force of East Timor.’ 26 They were backed by their commander-in-chief Xanana Gusmão, who argued that rather than be disarmed, Falintil should be integrated into Interfet’s forces. 27

Technically, Interfet was required to disarm any forces in East Timor other than the Indonesian military and police. This mandate reflected the diplomatic fiction that the international force was ending a civil conflict between rival East Timorese factions. 28 In reality, of course, Falintil was responsible for only a minute proportion of the violence in East Timor, and by and large remained in UN approved cantonment throughout the ballot period (see Chapter Three). The guerillas were more than happy to see the arrival of international troops, and were obviously no threat to them.


The requirement to disarm Falintil also ignored the political reality that the guerrillas, justifiably, considered themselves the victor in a long battle for national independence, and were viewed as heroes by the majority of the population. At the same time, Interfet was not prepared to simply give Falintil a free hand.

In the event, Interfet’s leadership reached a pragmatic understanding with the independence army. The issue of disarmament was delayed indefinitely, and Falintil was never completely disbanded. In return, Falintil commanders agreed that their men would not carry weapons outside the immediate area of their cantonments, or at the very least not in areas where Interfet were operating, removing the risk of an accidental clash with international troops. Nor was there to be any general Falintil mobilisation against retreating militias. At the same time, Falintil personnel began to help Interfet by providing intelligence on militia activities, and by acting as guides. This local information proved highly valuable. But although this arrangement defused immediate tensions, the role of Falintil in post-occupation East Timor was to prove a recurring problem for the international community, as discussed below.

A further complication was the growing incidence of extra-legal violence towards former militia members and supporters of integration, once the militias’ power was broken in any given area. From the first days of the deployment in Dili it was made clear that Interfet would not condone such actions, and a warning was issued to Falintil commanders to keep their men in line. In fact, such acts were frequently the work of pro-independence civilians rather than Falintil personnel, who were even reported to be holding ex-militia in protective custody. In all there seems to have been remarkably few acts of summary retribution.

Criticism of Interfet strategy

The lack of major opposition to Interfet, and in particular the absence of Australian fatalities, means that the military operation has largely been considered an outstanding success. This is true even of those who are critical of other aspects of how the government handled the overall issue of East Timor’s transition to

31 Ibid., pp. 51, 100; Paul Toohey, ‘Safety declared as UN bows to Falintil advice,’ *The Australian*, 18 October 1999, p. 10.
independence. Australian media reporting of the operation was overwhelmingly positive. Partly this resulted from a tendency of the Australian press to identify positively with ‘diggers’ placed in harm’s way, as well as a scarcely disguised approval for their mission. However, it was also due to a conscious effort by the Australian military to manage perceptions of the operation, making it an ‘information-era manoeuvre’ in the words of one defence analyst. The aim was to ensure that Interfet was perceived as competent and overwhelmingly powerful, in order to minimise opposition from the militias, and to build and maintain support from the Australian and East Timorese civilian populations. Engaging with the media was a core part of the strategy of ‘information operations’, alongside more traditional techniques of military intelligence and propaganda. As such, journalists were given extensive access to Australian forces, and were even accorded priority over military supplies on flights to Dili in the early days of the deployment. Given the successful operations conducted by the troops, this close relationship with the military helped to generate positive coverage. There was also a tendency to focus on the detailed action of (heroic) individuals, rather than examining the operation as a whole.

The one major criticism of Interfet that was aired at the time was that the Australians moved too slowly to secure the entire territory, and that they were not sufficiently aggressive in tackling the militia threat. International aid agencies were critical that Interfet did not rapidly extend its operations beyond Dili in the first two weeks of the operation. This meant that they could not supply emergency assistance to hundreds

---


33 For just a few examples, see Don Greenlees, ‘Enter the peacemaker,’ The Australian, 21 September 1999, p. 1; Ian McPhedran, ‘Wounded digger killed attacker,’ The Australian, 8 October 1999, p. 7; Ian McPhedran, Michael Harvey, and Clinton Porteous, ‘True heroes,’ Herald Sun, 8 October 1999, p. 1; Lindsay Murdoch, ‘Bullies melt away after soldiers hit the streets,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 21 September 1999, p. 1.


35 Breen, Mission accomplished, p. 40.


37 For a summary, see Cristalis, Bitter dawn, pp. 253-259.
of thousands of internally displaced East Timorese, the approaching wet season adding to the sense of urgency. One French agency, Medicins Du Monde, threatened to launch their own forays into the countryside, without Interfet approval or protection.38

Falintil too became frustrated at the slow pace of progress, which left them caring for tens of thousands of refugees without sufficient resources. The guerrillas felt that the militia threat was rapidly abating, a situation seemingly not appreciated by Interfet. The Falintil commander complained to a UN representative that ‘It looks as if the Interfet is on a holiday trip.’39 In mid-October it was announced that the three eastern districts of East Timor were considered a ‘green’ zone, safe for travel by civilians. This was not because Interfet had established any presence there, but because Falintil had made assurances that the militias were no longer any threat.40

Finally, criticism of Cosgrove came from within his own coalition forces. Some British officers were reported as saying the Australian was not moving aggressively against militia elements because he was overly fearful of sustaining casualties. In particular, the British criticised the policy of avoiding confrontation with militia who sought to provoke international troops. The British media also negatively contrasted Cosgrove’s approach with the force applied in the recent Kosovo campaign.41 Cosgrove derided such criticism as ‘rubbish’, arguing that he was moving his forces as quickly as possible while maintaining their safety, and that if anything the operation was running ahead of schedule.42 Ultimately, though, both criticisms and defence of Interfet’s strategy remained at a technical level. The only debate was over how fast Cosgrove could and should have proceeded in implementing his chosen strategy. As Cosgrove defined the issue, the choice was between ‘rapid’ action and ‘successful’ action,43 rather than between any options in the fundamental conception of how the deployment should proceed. Military experts commenting at the time and since have defended Cosgrove’s strategy on a similar basis, stressing the technical difficulties of inserting troops into East Timor, and the need to build up and maintain

38 Mark Dodd, ‘Critics talking rubbish, says Cosgrove,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 8 October 1999, p. 10.
40 Toohey, ‘Safety declared as UN bows to Falintil advice.’
41 ‘Peace leader just too gentle,’ The Adelaide Advertiser, 29 September 1999, p. 11.
42 Peter Alford, ‘Cosgrove where he planned to be,’ The Courier-Mail, 2 October 1999, p. 8; Dodd, ‘Critics talking rubbish, says Cosgrove.’
43 Alford, ‘Cosgrove where he planned to be.’
forces to counter all potential threats from the TNI and militias. The underlying political logic of the strategy has therefore not generally been considered, and it is to this question that this chapter now turns.

2. Interfet as the continuation of Australian policy by other means

Following von Clausewitz’s dictum that ‘War is a mere continuation of policy by other means’, a critical assessment of Australia’s intervention in East Timor requires that Interfet be considered in the wider policy context. This is not simply a question of how quickly it achieved its own objectives, laid down at the operational level. More important is an analysis of what Australia’s military strategy in East Timor reveals about its broader foreign policy agenda.

According to the official account, Australia’s motivation in launching Interfet was self-evidently one of humanitarianism, that is, to stop unacceptable violence and destruction in East Timor (see Chapter Four). As discussed in Chapter Three, there were three elements to the post-ballot violence: first, the murder of between 900 and 1,200 people, targeted in particular at prominent individual supporters of independence, but also expanding to acts of collective punishment; second, the deportation of around 250,000 people to West Timor, most of them unwilling; and third, extensive destruction of property and infrastructure, particularly in Dili and the western districts of East Timor. An intervention based on humanitarianism could be expected to address all three aspects of this violence as quickly as possible.

It was not possible, however, for the Australian military to make these humanitarian concerns Interfet’s overriding priority. In difficult operational conditions, Cosgrove had to balance the mission’s stated objective of aiding the East Timorese with the unstated but vital need to avoid damaging conflict with Indonesian forces.

44 For example, Bob Lowry, ‘Wisdom dictates Interfet’s progress,’ The Australian, 9 October 1999, p. 14; Ryan, ‘Primary responsibilities and primary risks,’ p. 73; Smith and Dee, Peacekeeping in East Timor: The path to independence, p. 47. See also Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, p. 87.
Stopping the loss of life

The mass murder of independence supporters was the most compelling reason given for humanitarian intervention in East Timor. The death toll would indeed have risen somewhat if the intervention had not taken place. Some killings did continue after Interfet arrived on September 20th, as discussed below. The arrival of international troops also set a definite deadline for the TNI’s withdrawal, without which such murders would have continued, although probably with decreasing frequency.

However, these incidents notwithstanding, the sort of mass killings used to justify the intervention had already largely stopped by the time Habibie announced an international force would be allowed into East Timor (as discussed in Chapter Three), and none took place between then and the arrival of Interfet. One Right-wing critic pounced on the fact that the numbers of dead discovered by Interfet did not match the pre-intervention rhetoric of ‘genocide’. But the timing of the killings that did occur has not been commented on, because it is axiomatic to both sides of the current debate on Australia’s policy that a military intervention in East Timor was necessary to stop militia violence.

The murders did not abate because the militias and TNI had managed to eliminate all those they wanted dead. It was because around half the East Timorese population was already being deported from East Timor by Indonesian forces, or else were hiding in remote regions of the territory, some under what protection Falintil could offer. The bigger towns, where militia could more easily target large numbers of civilians, were largely abandoned. Crucially, rather than attempt to hunt down the civilian population who had gone into hiding, the TNI and the militias concentrated on systemically destroying the territory’s physical assets, preparatory to their evacuation. Nor were there mass killings of refugees in West Timor, although individuals continued to be targeted.

It should be stressed that Interfet did not force the TNI or the militias to leave East Timor through military operations. Indonesia’s evacuation of East Timor was a result of combined domestic and international political pressure on Indonesia’s leaders.

46 Andrew Bolt, ‘It’s just possible the Indonesians are not mass murderers after all,’ Herald Sun, 7 October 1999, p. 18.
47 For example, Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, pp. 96-97; Fernandes, Reluctant saviour, p. 114.
That they permitted an international military intervention was itself a result of this pressure, not its cause. In Dili, Indonesian forces were allowed to leave in their own time, as discussed below. In most other towns and regions, Interfet arrived to find that both the civilian population and the TNI and militias had already departed.\textsuperscript{49} As already noted, most of the eastern districts were declared secure without Interfet’s presence at all, because Falintil reported the militias gone. It was only in one or two towns on the western border that Interfet actually dislodged the militias using force. Even here the civilian population had already fled, so it is doubtful if many lives were saved by Interfet’s arrival. Military action was not even the most important factor in limiting sporadic militia incursions into East Timor after Interfet had secured the border. As Kingsbury argues, this was again achieved through political pressure, although a show of military force helped to demonstrate the serious intent of Australia and its allies.\textsuperscript{50}

There are three major exceptions to the pattern of mass killings having stopped before the military intervention. But in none of these cases was Interfet able to actually intervene to stop the violence, because it did not have a presence in the areas concerned. The first was a massacre on September 25\textsuperscript{th}, in which nine people were killed by militia in the eastern Lautem area.\textsuperscript{51} It would be another 10 days before Interfet established even a minimal presence in this region. The second was the retreat of TNI territorial battalion 745, and their militia allies, from Los Palos in the east, across the border to West Timor, on September 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st}. As they moved through East Timor, this group killed around 20 people, although the murders were more opportunistic than planned.\textsuperscript{52} But Interfet made no move to stop them, although it is unlikely the withdrawal of an entire battalion would have escaped the notice of Australian intelligence.

The third exception was the killing of 12 people in Maquelab in the Oecussi enclave on October 20\textsuperscript{th}.\textsuperscript{53} The relative isolation of Oecussi meant that serious militia activity only occurred there after the ballot, as the rest of East Timor was already being evacuated. Again, Interfet did not move to secure Oecussi until October 22\textsuperscript{nd}, a month after their arrival in Dili. Even this action was only taken after Falintil created

\textsuperscript{49} For example, see Breen, \textit{Mission accomplished}, pp. 54-55, 58, 63, 65.
\textsuperscript{50} Kingsbury, ‘East Timor border security,’ pp. 278-279.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., pp. 240-244. Those killed included a Dutch journalist.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 236.
some media attention by dispatching a teenage boy with a letter begging for international attention, who traveled overland through West Timor to Interfet controlled territory.\textsuperscript{54}

Once Indonesia had been pressured into leaving East Timor, the chief risk to human life was mass starvation and illness, brought on by displacement of the population and disruption of the territory’s economy. This need was eventually addressed by the international intervention. But humanitarian aid seems almost to have been an afterthought in Interfet planning, and operationally the delivery of aid always took second place behind security considerations. Relief flights were cancelled for several days at the beginning of the deployment, because priority was given to troops and military equipment (and journalists).\textsuperscript{55} What food was available in Dili was not distributed quickly enough, resulting in hungry refugees looting aid warehouses twice in the first week of the deployment.\textsuperscript{56} The frustration of aid agencies at not being able to move beyond Dili has already been noted. When Interfet did venture beyond the capital, the immediate provision of food aid was a secondary consideration to what were security operations, as acknowledged by an Australian officer when his troops entered Liquica.\textsuperscript{57}

In his semi-official review of the deployment, Ryan displays the ambiguous attitude of the military towards aid delivery. He is critical of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) for their lack of organisation, but he acknowledges that Interfet was largely reliant on them for the provision of aid. This was because Interfet itself was not structured to meet the many needs of the Timorese, nor should it have been. The immediate problem of establishing and guaranteeing security had to take priority without the distractions associated with the provision of aid… the NGOs were effectively all that was available.\textsuperscript{58}


\textsuperscript{56} Mark Dodd, ‘Rice stolen in midnight raid on warehouse,’ \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald}, 30 September 1999, p. 8; Geoff Spencer, ‘Hungry mob loots Dili warehouse,’ \textit{The Adelaide Advertiser}, 23 September 1999, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{57} Max Blenkin, ‘Troops go into bandit country,’ \textit{The Courier-Mail}, 28 September 1999, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{58} Ryan, ‘Primary responsibilities and primary risks,’ p. 109.
Stopping forced deportations and physical destruction

If Interfet arrived too late to prevent mass killings, it acted too slowly and cautiously to bring a halt to deportations of the East Timorese population or the physical destruction of the territory, which continued well after its arrival. The ‘oil spot’ strategy meant that the border region did not come under Interfet’s control until nearly three weeks into the deployment. As the TNI and the militias were allowed to retreat at their own pace into West Timor, or other Indonesian islands, they continued to take civilians with them. It is unclear how many civilians were deported in the period after Interfet arrived in Dili, although it was probably a minority of the total number of deportees. Nor can it be accurately said what proportion of them might have opted to stay were they given a genuine choice. In most areas Interfet did not have a presence even observing the deportations, let alone a force capable of protecting those unwilling to depart. But even in Dili itself, the ‘evacuation’ process continued after Interfet arrived, with East Timorese civilians being ushered onto boats from docks under the dual control of Indonesian and Australian troops. No effort was made by Interfet to take control of the process. The one exception to this pattern was the Australian raid to Com, which prevented the deportation of over 2,000 people, although the chief motivation in this case seems to have been to pre-empt a Falintil rescue attempt.

Finally, the prevention of physical destruction was certainly not a priority for Interfet, and they did not even fully enforce their UN mandate in this respect. For days after Interfet arrived in Dili, the TNI and militias continued acts of arson. This was partly because the TNI had the right to move around the city, and used military vehicles to transport accelerants. But even had this not been the case, Australian forces were not authorised to use lethal force to prevent arson, merely challenging those caught in the act. This is despite Interfet being mandated by the UN to use force if necessary to restore order. Indonesian forces were also allowed to take looted possessions with them, as well as shipping out stocks of food aid. Outside of Dili, there was no interference in TNI and militia looting and arson at all. Again, the slow

---

60 Breen, *Mission accomplished*.
61 Ibid., pp. 56-57.
62 Ibid., pp. 56-58.
63 Ibid., pp. 48-50.
pace of Interfet’s advance to the western border was a crucial factor, with those regions suffering the most thorough destruction.\textsuperscript{64}

**Interfet and the Australia-Indonesia relationship**

Interfet’s ability to deliver on its humanitarian promise was therefore systematically undermined, not only because it was deployed after the majority of violence had already occurred, but also because of the slow pace at which it established a presence outside of Dili. In addition, Australian forces were at times reluctant to confront those responsible for the violence and destruction.

Defenders of Australia’s strategy imply that there was simply no alternative to this cautious approach, because a more aggressive approach would have resulted in more casualties on both sides. It is true that a more rapid deployment throughout East Timor probably would have led to more clashes with the militias, because it would have meant a reduction in the overwhelming firepower Australia used to overawe their opponents.\textsuperscript{65} It would also have increased the risk of a serious clash with Indonesian regular forces, although given the evidence that the TNI had accepted the need to leave East Timor, this risk should not be overstated. But the likelihood of increased casualties is not sufficient in itself to explain Australia’s strategy. In any military operation, the risk of sustaining losses must be balanced against the need to fulfill the objectives of the operation, which was the point made by those members of the Interfet alliance who criticised Cosgrove’s strategy. What remains to be explained is why Interfet was so highly averse to sustaining and inflicting casualties.

Partly there was the need to maintain domestic Australian political support for the intervention. The image of substantial numbers of Australian soldiers returning in body bags would have re-emboldened critics of Howard’s new East Timor strategy, who were sidelined by the overwhelming general enthusiasm for the deployment. In turn, support for the deployment among the general population might have fallen, although it would have taken major reversals before this became a serious political problem for Howard.

A more important issue was the status of the Australian-Indonesian bilateral relationship. It was inevitable that Australia’s intervention in East Timor would at


least cause short term friction. But it was essential that any lasting damage be reduced as far as possible. In particular open combat between Interfet and the TNI had to be avoided, and clashes with the militia kept to a minimum. More substantial casualties on either side would not only have been an intrinsic problem within the diplomatic relationship. They would also have inflamed nationalist sentiments among the general population in both countries, reducing the ability of politicians on both sides to adopt a reconciliatory stance.

This was the ‘disaster’ that Cosgrove sought to avert through his consultations with Indonesian commanders, who were likewise keen to avoid any confrontation. It was no accident that Australian troops entered areas to find their TNI counterparts departed, because their movements were in general coordinated. As Dickens writes,

TNI commanders responsible for East Timor were kept fully briefed on INTERFET’s intentions and were given the space to retire gracefully from East Timor.  

To facilitate this cooperation, Interfet continued to operate under the premise that senior TNI commanders were not involved in supporting militia activities, despite mounting evidence to the contrary.

Amidst the chaotic transfer of power in East Timor, even an accidental clash might have quickly spiraled into something much more significant, despite the best of intentions. Accordingly, the Australians at times gave great leeway to the TNI, a series of provocations from low ranking Indonesian soldiers notwithstanding. A well publicised incident in Dili on September 21st illustrates the point. As TNI Battalion 745 retreated to West Timor, they passed through the capital late at night, in a convoy of around 60 trucks. The group included both regular soldiers and militia, with individuals responsible for the recent killings of civilians almost certainly among them, and they were carrying possessions they had looted along the way. The movement of this particular convoy had not been coordinated with Interfet, and was stopped at two Australian roadblocks. A strict fulfillment of their mandate would have required the detention of any militiamen in the convoy. It seems certain, however, that this would have resulted in causalities on both sides, and at both

---

66 Dickens, ‘The United Nations in East Timor: Intervention at the military operational level,’ p. 214. See also Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, p. 130.
68 See Breen, Mission accomplished, pp. 45-47.
roadblocks the convoy was allowed to pass. Cosgrove and commentators have held up this incident as an example of the good sense shown by average soldiers in avoiding unnecessary clashes. More importantly, it indicates the accommodating attitude of Interfet as a whole.

Interfet also acted to reduce the possibility of TNI and militia personnel being put on trial for the destruction of East Timor, another potential source of tension with the Indonesian government. The failure to secure evidence of war crimes in the first days of the deployment is understandable, given the lack of specialist personnel available. But more than this, Australia actively sought to prevent evidence coming to light. Human rights activists tell how at first they were able to secure documents left behind by retreating Indonesian forces, which contained valuable evidence of systematic involvement by the TNI in militia activities. Soon, however, the buildings containing these documents were put under Interfet guard, and access was denied to East Timorese. The remaining documents have never seen the light of day, despite repeated request for them. There are also allegations that Interfet destroyed physical evidence of mass killings, and that they played down evidence of militia atrocities, such as blaming wild dogs for the mutilation of victims’ bodies, or by minimising casualty estimates. Later, Australia refused to release substantial amounts of incriminating intelligence material which they had gathered on Indonesian activities. Ostensibly, this was to protect details of Australia’s intelligence gathering techniques, although, as Ball argues, much of the information concerned could have been collected by anyone with an appropriate radio receiver, and Australia’s broad capability to eavesdrop on Indonesia’s military communications is not secret in any case.

There was also a lax attitude towards the capture of militia members by Interfet. In the first days of the deployment, captured militia were often questioned and released,

---

69 Although in fact the key decision was taken by an Australian general, not the ‘strategic corporal’ to which some refer. See Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, pp. 130-131; Ryan, ‘Primary responsibilities and primary risks,’ pp. 71-72.

70 Breen, Mission accomplished, pp. 49-50.

71 Interview with José Luis de Oliviera, 23.11.2007, Dili; Interview with Joaquim Fonseca, 22.11.2007, Dili; Interview with Agung Putri, 14.02.2007, Jakarta.


or turned over to Indonesian forces, which amounted to the same thing.\textsuperscript{74} Later, as Interfet moved to the western border regions, it seems that at least some militia were escorted into West Timor, where they would be free to continue their activities. Ryan states that militia captured in the raid on Suai on September 6\textsuperscript{th} were taken to the border, although Breen says they were taken to Dili.\textsuperscript{75} Martinkus also reports dozens of captured militiamen being taken to the West Timor border at this time, including those suspected of committing atrocities.\textsuperscript{76}

\textit{Australia abhors a power vacuum}

There have been suggestions that Australia actually sought to maximise the amount of violence and physical destruction in East Timor. Fernandes argues that Australia wanted to see the militias succeed in restoring East Timor to Indonesian control, and had cooperated with Indonesia’s strategy by withdrawing international observers and by delaying the deployment of the peacekeeping force.\textsuperscript{77} Grenfell cites the opinion of an East Timorese activist that Australia deliberately allowed the destruction, so that Interfet ‘could come as angels, to come as gods, to come and save East Timor.’ This would ensure that Australia would meet no resistance to its interests in the country following independence.\textsuperscript{78} Another activist expressed similar ideas to the author, arguing Australia allowed the destruction in order to then appear as Timor’s saviour, regaining the population’s trust.\textsuperscript{79} Taudevin is more ambiguous, arguing that ‘Troops did not go in until it suited Indonesia. The focus on Dili entirely suited the strategy of the Indonesian military. Who was really calling the shots?’\textsuperscript{80}

An Australian preference for the destruction of East Timor cannot be completely ruled out, but it almost certainly overstates the case. There is no positive evidence of such a policy, and the extent of the destruction was also a problem for Australia, hampering the emergence of East Timor as a stable, self-supporting nation. It is more likely that stopping the violence and destruction, although not undesirable in itself, was not as high a priority as avoiding conflict with Indonesia.

\textsuperscript{74} Peter Alford, ‘Killers walk free under UN rules,’ \textit{The Australian}, 30 September 1999, p. 9; Andre Malan, ‘Peacekeepers turn tables on militia,’ \textit{The West Australian}, 22 September 1999, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{75} Breen, \textit{Mission accomplished}, p. 70; Ryan, ‘Primary responsibilities and primary risks,’ p. 132.
\textsuperscript{76} Martinkus, \textit{A dirty little war}, pp. 388-389.
\textsuperscript{77} Fernandes, \textit{Reluctant saviour}, pp. 84-85, 113-114.
\textsuperscript{78} Damian Grenfell, ‘Nation-building and the politics of oil in East Timor,’ \textit{Arena Journal}, no. 22 (2004), p. 50.
\textsuperscript{79} Interview with José Luis de Oliviera.
\textsuperscript{80} Taudevin, \textit{East Timor: Too little too late}, p. 282.
Moreover, preventing military and diplomatic conflict with Indonesia was not in fact an inviolate principle for Interfet. Confrontations with Indonesian regular forces were studiously avoided, even those clearly acting in concert with militia elements. Militiamen were also allowed to retreat along with their Indonesian sponsors. But this initial accommodating attitude quickly hardened once Interfet had taken control of an area, and militias operating on their own posed a potential threat to this control. As such, once the Indonesian evacuation of Dili began to accelerate on September 25th, Interfet security operations were also stepped up, ensuring that the militia retreated along with their sponsors. An even clearer example is the operation to secure the border with West Timor. Although it took two weeks before it was launched, once underway it involved airborne and amphibious assaults by hundreds of combat troops supported by armoured vehicles. Australian troops actively sought to flush out any militia remaining in the region, resulting in a number of clashes, as previously discussed. As Kingsbury writes, the full extent of the force used by Interfet has not been publicly acknowledged, again to protect the Australia-Indonesia relationship. But this operation was in part designed to show that Australian forces were prepared to use their superior firepower if challenged.\textsuperscript{81}

As Indonesia evacuated from East Timor, Interfet moved to fill the power vacuum left in their wake, using force where necessary to achieve this. Indonesia’s withdrawal from the territory may have been all but inevitable after the ballot, but it was far less clear how the transition to independence would unfold. The worst possible outcome for Australia would have been an East Timor in which there was no clear state power. For example, although Falantil might have secured most of the country, without Interfet’s firepower the militias could have operated in the western border regions indefinitely. In turn, this would have undermined the UN’s efforts to control a gradual transition to full East Timorese independence, as discussed below.

The Australian military provided the hard foundation of armed force on which the UN’s transitional state in East Timor rested. To achieve this, Interfet had to assert its dominance over all other armed groups. The obvious threat posed by the militias was soon controlled. But the possibility of Falantil and the CNRT (National Council of Timorese Resistance) operating outside UN supervision was also a risk to stability. For example, in November 1999 Xanana Gusmão entered Dili with 20 armed

\textsuperscript{81} Kingsbury, ‘East Timor border security,’ p. 277.
guerillas, and in February 2000 the CNRT was reported to be operating as the de
facto government in some parts of the country. Underlying the negotiated
settlement between Interfet and Falantil was the threat of using force against the
guerillas to remove their challenge to UN authority.

Interfet’s stated goal of assisting the East Timorese had to be balanced against two
other, ultimately more important concerns for Australian policy; attempting to
maintain relations with Indonesia, while simultaneously ensuring stability in East
Timor. This was a direct continuation of Australia’s policy from the pre-ballot
period. As in the pre-ballot period, these two goals could sometimes be difficult to
reconcile, but on the whole the operation was successful, as discussed in Chapter Six.
Australia’s leading role in Interfet also ensured that its interests would be well
represented in the period of UN rule in East Timor, the period which this chapter
now addresses.

3. The international community and the reconstruction of
East Timor

Once a basic level of security was established in East Timor, international attention
turned to reconstruction and the transition to national sovereignty. Although as a
matter of law Portugal remained the recognised colonial power in East Timor, it was
the United Nations which took responsibility for the territory in the transitional
period, providing the civil administration and police force. Economic planning and
aid delivery, on the other hand, was overseen by the International Financial
Institutions (IFIs), and in particular the World Bank. East Timor became an
independent nation in May 2002, but the realities of poverty and dependence on the
international community did not always live up to the dreams of those who had
struggled for their nation’s freedom.

The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor

Although briefly the sole UN sponsored authority in East Timor, Interfet was not
intended to act as a long term administration for the territory. The United Nations
Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) re-established a presence in Dili in late

---

82 ‘Gusmao’s fighters accused of attacks,’ The Australian, 16 February 2000, p. 10; ‘Gusmao’s
September 1999, but a more substantial mission, UNTAET (United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor), was established by the Security Council on October 25th. From early November 1999, the first civilian elements of UNTAET began to arrive, and gradually assumed control of civil affairs from Interfet. The ad hoc Interfet coalition itself began to be replaced by an official UN ‘blue beret’ peacekeeping force, which was part of UNTAET. This force involved a greater number of nations than Interfet, and was under the command of a Thai general. It assumed full responsibility for security in February 2000.

UNTAET was created ‘as an integrated, multidimensional operation… fully responsible for the administration of the territory of East Timor during its transition to independence…’ It was probably the most ambitious ‘nation building’ task the international body had ever taken up. In terms both of personnel and physical assets, the Indonesian state in East Timor had essentially ceased to exist. UNTAET not only needed to fulfill all short term administrative functions, but was also responsible for preparing the country for full independence. In charge of this process was Sergio de Mello, a special representative of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. A career UN official, de Mello was later to be killed while serving in Iraq. At his disposal, de Mello had nearly 7,900 military and police personnel, and over 700 international and 1,700 local civilian staff members. For financial year 2001-2002, UNTAET’s budget was over US$470 million.

De Mello held all legislative and executive authority in East Timor, including appointing senior officials, and in effect he answered only to Secretary General Annan. This was the first time a UN mission had held such sovereign power, exceeding even that held in Kosovo. The UN entered into contractual arrangements with the World Bank which would shape East Timor’s long-term economic future, and even began treaty negotiations with Australia over oil and gas resources.

---

It was intended that UNTAET would last for two to three years, at which time the transition to independence would be complete. Accordingly, in August 2001, elections were held for a constitutional assembly. As well as drawing up the constitution, it served as the first parliament after independence. In April 2002, Xanana Gusmão was elected as East Timor’s first president, and East Timor became fully independent on May 20th, 2002. The UN, though, has maintained a permanent presence in East Timor. A peacekeeping force remained in place until May 2005, under the name of UNMISET (United Nations Mission of Support to East Timor), which was then reduced to a civil mission, UNOTIL (United Nations Office in Timor-Leste).

**Criticisms of the UN transition**

The lack of East Timorese control during the transitional period has been the focus of criticism of UNTAET. The mission was supposed to operate ‘in close consultation and cooperation with the people of East Timor...’ But even de Mello himself described his position as ‘benevolent despotism’ at best. One of the most notable critics was Jared Chopra, who originally served as UNTAET’s head of district administration but resigned in March 2000, disgusted at what he saw as the lack of accountability within the administration. In an influential article published in mid-2000, Chopra claimed that ‘The organizational and juridical status of the UN in East Timor is comparable with that of a pre-constitutional monarch in a sovereign kingdom.’ The East Timorese were not involved in planning UNTAET, and a modest proposal from the CNRT to form a Timorese Transitional Council was rejected at that time. Until late 1999, de Mello relied on personal contact with Xanana Gusmão for Timorese input, and while a National Consultative Committee

---

87 *Report of the Secretary General on the situation in East Timor*, p. 6.
88 Ibid., p. 7.
89 Cited in Chopra, ‘The UN’s kingdom of East Timor,’ p. 35.
90 Mark Dodd, ‘UN staff battle over independence policy,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March 2000, p. 10.
of 15 East Timorese was eventually appointed, it could still only offer advice to de Mello.⁹²

Many East Timorese shared Chopra’s criticisms. When an act of self-determination had first been discussed by Indonesia, the East Timorese independence leadership had suggested the need for a transitional period lasting years. Now that Indonesia was gone, however, their lack of involvement in the administration of their country began to grate. Already in November 1999 Gusmão attended a meeting with de Mello in Dili accompanied by 20 armed guerillas,⁹³ forcibly demonstrating the need to include independence leaders in decision making. The same month he stated that

We don’t feel very comfortable with some people acting like kings of East Timor, coming here to impose their models… We are strong enough to expel anybody from East Timor.⁹⁴

In May 2000, the CNRT demanded that UN regional administrators be replaced by Timorese within three months, with José Ramos-Horta complaining of the ‘growing level of frustration and disillusionment with the UN in East Timor, particularly among the young.’⁹⁵

Under increasing pressure over the lack of local representation, de Mello announced a process of ‘Timorisation’ in April 2000. Initially, this only involved the appointment of Timorese deputy regional administrators, and the establishment of regional advisory councils. The plan was widely rejected as tokenistic, including by many UN regional administrators. Finally, in July, a more thorough approach was adopted. De Mello appointed a new National Council, consisting entirely of East Timorese and expanded to 33, and later 36, members. An eight member ‘Cabinet of the Transitional Government in East Timor’ was also established, including four Timorese, with the later addition of Ramos-Horta as the cabinet member for Foreign Affairs. At the same time, the UN administrative apparatus was renamed the East Timor Transitional Authority, which gradually recruited Timorese staff at all

---

⁹² Chopra, ‘The UN’s kingdom of East Timor,’ p. 32.
⁹⁴ Cited in Cristalis, Bitter dawn, p. 266.
⁹⁵ Cited in Mark Riley, ‘Time for UN to Go: Timor leaders,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 24 May 2000, p. 22.
levels.96 These measures were a major step towards establishing a genuine East Timorese government. But given the ad hoc and reluctant fashion in which they were adopted, it is hard to avoid Chopra’s conclusion that the UN ‘had no inclination to share power with [the East Timorese] during the transition, or to include them in any decision-making beyond perfunctory consultation.’97

For most East Timorese, frustration at the lack of political participation was compounded by growing discontent over the economic situation, particularly in Dili, in which UN and other overseas staff enjoyed lifestyles unavailable to locals. The UN itself paid differential wages to overseas and local employees, with the latter earning just a few dollars a day.98 Symbolic of the problem was a floating hotel chartered by the UN to provide accommodation and recreational facilities, which East Timorese locals were actually banned from using.99 Some East Timorese took to literally eating the scraps from expensive restaurants which catered to international staff earning many times the wages of local workers.100

Nor were UN practices calculated to maximise long term development of the East Timorese economy. For example, supplies of drinking water for UN staff were imported from Indonesia, at an eventual cost of several million dollars, enough money to repair Dili’s own water supply system.101 Gusmão repeatedly criticised this lack of foresight, saying that the UN’s legacy in East Timor would amount to no more than leaving behind the hundreds of white, air-conditioned four wheel drive vehicles imported for the use of international staff.102

There was also resentment towards the host of foreign NGOs which began working in East Timor under UNTAET. Often, these groups were seen as replicating the expensive and isolated lifestyles of the UN staff proper. CNRT leaders denounced them as ‘neo-colonialist’ in their attitudes, since they did not involve local people in

97 Chopra, ‘The UN’s kingdom of East Timor,’ p. 31.
98 Interview with an anonymous NGO worker in East Timor, 08.11.2007, Dili; Chopra, ‘The UN’s kingdom of East Timor,’ p. 32.
100 Mark Dodd, ‘Foreign aid UN’s food scraps,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 30 November 1999, p. 11.
101 Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, p. 159.
102 Mark Dodd, ‘Gusmao gives UN team a serve: ‘We don’t want a legacy of cars’,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 10 October 2000, p. 11; Mark Dodd, ‘Gusmao: Where is the aid going?’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 26 May 2000, p. 12.
decision making. Indonesian and East Timorese activists and aid workers have likewise been angered by the top-down approach of foreign NGOs, and their role in demobilising established Timorese political and social networks, in favour of supposedly ‘apolitical’ local NGOs. East Timorese workers were also angered by the low wages paid by NGOs, which were not keeping pace with rising inflation, as well as long hours and poor working conditions. For example, in April 2000 an Australian aid organisation was reportedly paying four Australian dollars per day to employees working 10 hours a day, seven days a week, without sick leave or compensation for injury. These grievances led to East Timorese workers launching a number of industrial actions against the UN and humanitarian NGOs, and the private companies which they contracted.

The UN focused on rapidly holding elections in order to bring its mission to what could be seen as a successful end. The social and economic development of the country, however, was given a far lower priority. From January 2000 there were a series of riots and violent protests in Dili and regional centres, fuelled by anger over continuing unemployment and poverty. There were also numerous incidences of conflict between street gangs. Riots again broke out in December 2002, shortly after independence, sparked by accusations of brutality by the new police force.

Indeed, the most serious failure of UN policy was the flawed establishment of East Timor’s security forces. Originally, it was envisaged that East Timor would not need

104 Interview with an anonymous NGO worker in East Timor; Interview with Oscar da Silva, 14.11.2007, Dili; Interview with Nuno Rodriguez; Interview with Surjawo, 20.02.2007, Jogjakarta.
105 ‘Free East Timor? For the workers, it’s just cheap,’ Workers Online (online), no. 49, 7 April, 2000.
107 Chopra, ‘The UN’s kingdom of East Timor.’; Interview with Agung Putri p. 31; Interview with Nuno Rodriguez.
fully fledged armed forces. However, the political difficulty of demobilising the
guerillas led to the creation of the F-FDTL (East Timor Defence Forces). This force
incorporated a sizeable minority of the former guerillas, with the main criteria for
recruitment seeming to be personal loyalty to Xanana Gusmão. This created a pool of
resentful veterans who were not incorporated into the new army, as well as removing
numerous military leaders who were trusted by their local communities. At the same
time, the Timorese police force was largely recruited from those who had previously
served under the Indonesians, a move which did little to establish the new force’s
credibility. To make matters worse, the recruitment of security forces partly
established the basis for the rupture of the state along perceived ‘ethnic’ lines in
April and May 2006, which saw armed clashes between the police and the military,
as discussed in Chapter Seven. This is because most police who served under the
Indonesians came from the east of the territory, where the occupation received
greater popular support, while Falintil had its strongest base in the west of the
territory.

The International Financial Institutions and the reconstruction of East
Timor

Discontent over low wages and unemployment was a symptom of far wider
economic difficulties confronting East Timor following the vote for independence,
difficulties which can hardly be overestimated. East Timor was always one of the
poorest areas in Indonesia. In 1990, East Timor’s gross regional product per capita
was Rp364,000, compared with Rp917,000 in relatively prosperous West Java.
East Timor’s economy was overwhelmingly based on agriculture, from which over
70% of the population derived their main income in 1997. In the same year, only
41% of people were literate, and just 29% of households had access to clean water
while 22% had access to electricity.

110 Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, pp. 161-162; Ludovic Hood, ‘Security sector
Interview with Agung Putri.
111 See Report of the United Nations Independent Special Commission of Inquiry for Timor-Leste,
United Nations, 2 October, 2006, pp. 18-21; Dionisio Babo-Soares, Branching from the trunk: East
Timorese perceptions of nationalism in transition, PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 2003,
pp. 284-300.
112 Hal Hill, The Indonesian economy, 2 ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 222-
223.
113 Background paper prepared for the information meeting on East Timor, World Bank, 29
September, 1999, p. 3.
Due to the post-ballot destruction, East Timor’s economy declined from this low base. Economic activity, including agriculture, ground almost to a halt as a result of the violence and population displacement. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell by two percent between 1997 and 1998, and then a further 38 percent between 1998 and 1999 (see Table 5.1). A huge amount of investment would be needed simply to replace private property and public infrastructure destroyed by Indonesian forces. Moreover, most skilled workers and public servants in the territory had been transmigrants from other parts of Indonesia, and their departure left East Timor with shortages of skilled labour.

The arrival of UNTAET and other international staff brought a much needed inflow of foreign currency. By 2001 GDP had returned to pre-conflict levels. But the international presence also created something of a bubble economy, especially in Dili, which rapidly deflated when the bulk of UN personnel started to leave following independence. Moreover, the concentration of the international community in Dili only resulted in limited trickle down benefits for the population in other areas. Between 2001 and 2003 East Timor’s non-oil GDP actually declined, from US$368 to US$336 million.

**Table 5.1: Economic growth in East Timor, 1997-2003**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GDP, millions of US dollars</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage change</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-38</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>-7</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


While UNTAET held overall responsibility for reconstruction, the task of actually delivering aid, as well as devising an economic strategy for the new nation, fell to the

---


117 Interview with Emmanuel Braz, 14.11.2007, Dili.


IFIs, in particular the World Bank. This was an unusual situation for the Bank, which normally deals with the governments of sovereign nations, and insisted on considering UNTAET as such.\footnote{120} Planning for economic reconstruction actually began well before the ballot, and in December 1999 international donors pledged US$523 million for what became the Transitional Fund in East Timor. This fund was managed by the World Bank on behalf of the international community, and was the largest ongoing source of international aid, other than the cost of maintaining UNTAET itself.\footnote{121} The Asian Development Bank (ADB) helped administer the fund, and also delivered many projects on the ground.\footnote{122}

The other major institution involved was the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF advised the transitional administration on economic policy, including overseeing the budgetary process. It also recruited and funded many of the key staff working in these areas. As with the World Bank, this was a departure from the IMF’s normal practice of consulting with the sovereign governments which are its members.\footnote{123}

The IFIs continued in their influential roles in East Timor after independence.\footnote{124} Usually, these organisations gain influence in a country through the provision of loans to the government and the supervision of their repayment. The Alkatiri government rejected the use of debt in economic development, due to its perceived incapacity to either effectively administer or repay the loans.\footnote{125} But international donors did provide funds to cover the budget deficit East Timor experienced for several years after independence, including budget increases from 2002, which attempted to counter rising poverty. These funds continued to be managed through the auspices of the World Bank, giving the IFIs oversight of East Timor’s budget making process. In 2006 the program was expected to continue until at least 2008.\footnote{126}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\footnotesize
\item Chopra, ‘The UN’s kingdom of East Timor,’ p. 30.
\item ‘The International Monetary Fund in East Timor,’ \textit{The La’o Hamutuk Bulletin} (online), vol. 2, no. 3, June, 2001; \textit{World Bank country assistance strategy for Timor-Leste FY 06-08}, World Bank, no. 32700-TP, 2005, p. 1; Smith and Dee, \textit{Peacekeeping in East Timor: The path to independence}, p. 88.
\item ‘The International Monetary Fund in East Timor.’; Luis M. Valdivieso, et al., \textit{East Timor: Establishing the foundations of sound macroeconomic management}, International Monetary Fund, 2000, pp. 1-2.
\item Interview with José Teixeira, 21.11.2007, Dili.
\item Anderson, ‘Self-determination after independence,’ pp. 181-183; Interview with José Teixeira. For details of the World Bank’s ongoing program, see \textit{Background paper for the Timor-Leste and}}
The imposition of neo-liberalism in East Timor

The IFIs’ vision for East Timor’s economic development rested firmly within the neo-liberal policy paradigm which they had consistently championed since the early 1980s. Their insistence that developing countries adopt these policies was partly driven by ideological conviction, but more fundamentally by a desire to reshape global economic relations. These changes were largely to the advantage of the developed capitalist economies, and in particular US financial interests.\textsuperscript{127}

In the case of East Timor, though, these global considerations can hardly apply. Some international corporations did set up profitable operations in post-occupation Timor. Australian businesses perhaps benefited the most from reconstruction projects and new commercial opportunities, as discussed below. But the long term importance of such a small, impoverished nation to the world economy is less than marginal. Only the oil and gas deposits in the Timor Sea are of substantial value, but their exploitation would in any case be governed by bilateral agreement with Australia.

Instead, it seems the importance of East Timor to the IFIs was largely ideological. These organisations tended to view East Timor as a ‘clean slate’ in economic and development terms.\textsuperscript{128} The new country could therefore serve as a sort of showcase for what the IFIs considered best practice for developing countries. As Anderson writes,

\begin{quote}
Much of the World Bank willingness to engage in ‘free market’ social engineering was justified by a notion that post-conflict East Timor was ‘ground zero,’ in development terms. This was seen by some in the World Bank as an advantage.\textsuperscript{129}
\end{quote}

Another motivating factor may have been the desire to limit the size of the East Timorese government in order to reduce the need for ongoing international assistance. From an early stage, the IFIs insisted that Indonesia’s system of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{128} A term actually used in a World Bank document, see ‘The World Bank in East Timor,’ \textit{The La’o Hamutuk Bulletin} (online), vol. 1, no. 4, December, 2000. Likewise, Hill and Saldhana considered East Timor’s economic policy a ‘\textit{tabula rasa}’. Hill and Saldanha, ‘The key issues,’ p. 4. This vision of East Timor was rejected by social justice activists; Interview with Nuno Rodriguez.
\textsuperscript{129} Anderson, ‘Self-determination after independence,’ p. 177.
\end{flushright}
administration had been inefficient and funded at a level that would not be sustainable in the long term.\textsuperscript{130}

Whatever the motivation, the IFIs promoted a consistent neo-liberal agenda in East Timor.\textsuperscript{131} The IMF encouraged the use of the US dollar as East Timor’s currency,\textsuperscript{132} which removed the government’s ability to pursue inflationary monetary policies. Fiscally, the IMF insisted on the need for budget restraint.\textsuperscript{133} The IFIs argued that economic development and poverty reduction must be achieved through the private market, especially by attracting foreign investment and adopting an open trading regime.\textsuperscript{134} One former minister in the Alkatiri government described the only strategy for economic development which they would accept as being ‘build your private sector and they should come.’\textsuperscript{135} These values were ingrained into the nascent administration, in particular the new central bank, the Banking and Payments Authority of East Timor.\textsuperscript{136} Because of its negative impact on private investment, the World Bank opposed setting a minimum wage in East Timor, or if one was legally set, argued that it should be lower than the US$85 a month that was then the informal rate.\textsuperscript{137}

The World Bank also insisted that market-based agriculture should be the basis for future economic development in East Timor. The Bank therefore favoured the development of cash crops for export, although other than coffee it was not obvious

\textsuperscript{130} For example, see Background paper prepared for the information meeting on East Timor, p. 3; Rowan Callick, ‘Our man in the pacific,’ The Australian Financial Review, 27 April 2001, p. 26; Paul Daley, ‘Gusmao wary of Bank’s policy push,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 10 November 1999, p. 13.

\textsuperscript{131} This program was most clearly set out in Valdivieso, et al., East Timor: Establishing the foundations of sound macroeconomic management.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., p. 11.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., pp. 13-14, 28-29.


\textsuperscript{135} Interview with José Teixeira.

\textsuperscript{136} Values clearly expressed in the bank’s publications, see for example ‘Attracting FDI: can Timor-Leste be inspired by the Cambodian experience?’ Economic Bulletin (online), vol. 2, no. 1, April, 2004; ‘Foreign direct investment and economic development,’ Economic Bulletin (online), vol. 1, no. 4, January, 2004; ‘Macroeconomic policy: What is it and who is responsible for it?’ Economic Bulletin (online), vol. 2, no. 2, April, 2004. A neo-liberal approach also permeates the country’s first National Development Plan, the writing of which was overseen by the IFIs and the UN. East Timor National Development Plan, East Timor Planning Commission, 2002.

\textsuperscript{137} Maitreyi Bordia Das, The labor market impact of minimum wage policy: The case of Timor-Leste in comparative perspective, World Bank, June 26, 2004. See also IMF statement to Interim Donors’ Meeting on Timor-Leste.
what products might be developed. Nor was there to be any public assistance in establishing new exports. Instead, the World Bank insisted that its Pilot Agricultural Service Centers, which provided agricultural services and supplies at a local level, must be run on a commercial basis. Likewise, the ADB insisted that its microfinance poverty reduction program be run from the start on a for profit basis, with an eye to future privatisation.

Like the UN, the World Bank was rhetorically committed to local participation in planning, and Chopra for one saw the Bank as a possible counter to the UN’s centralised decision making. Others commentators, however, have been far more critical of the IFIs’ record in this regard. For example the Community Empowerment Project (CEP), the Bank’s favoured vehicle for development spending, was held up as a model of community control. But East Timorese activists argue that local people had little real control over CEP programs, which could only operate within parameters laid down by the World Bank itself. Similarly, in 2001 a group of East Timorese economists hired by the Bank resigned in protest because they felt that their work was not taken seriously.

It is likely that East Timor’s leaders would have adopted broadly market oriented policies even without such direct intervention by the IFIs. Independence leaders frequently stated their adherence to free market principles. Perhaps the exception was the major role accorded to the state in generating economic growth by the first Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri, whose government was reportedly frustrated at the...
need to constantly conform to the IFIs’ demands. But, as Cotton writes, it was always clear that East Timor would be dependent on international capital for development, and so its leaders would have to accommodate themselves to the prevailing policy norms, whatever their personal preferences.

However, when necessary the IFIs did attempt to impose their policies against the wishes of the East Timorese, although not always successfully. For example, because of their focus on market oriented agriculture, the World Bank and ADB opposed a food security program based on increasing grain production for local consumption, as well as the construction of publicly owned silos. Publicly owned abattoirs were also opposed. The World Bank also rejected East Timorese proposals that an agricultural research and development organisation be a publicly owned institution. Likewise, in 2002, the ADB announced plans to privatisate the electricity and water systems it controlled, although this contradicted the government’s National Development Plan.

In the period under discussion, the East Timorese did not see substantial benefits from a free market orientation in the coffee industry. Under Indonesian rule, what little wealth was generated from the coffee trade was mainly garnered by the Indonesian military. This began to change in 1994 when the National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA) of the USA set out to break the military monopoly on coffee exports. The project was undertaken on contract with the US foreign aid authority, USAID, with backing from the Central Intelligence Agency. In the post occupation period, the NCBA came to control 40% of Timorese coffee, dominating the high quality segment of the industry. Via international coffee brokers, much of this coffee was sold to US multi-national Starbucks, which sells ‘fair trade’ East Timorese coffee at a premium price, projecting an image of good corporate

144 Speech by the Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri, at the opening session of the Timor-Leste development partners meeting, Timor-Leste Office of the Prime Minister, 04.04.2006 (accessed 06.07.2007, http://www.pm.gov.tp/speech4april.htm); Interview with José Teixeira.
145 Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, p. 160.
citizenship. But East Timorese farmers still received as little as 14 or 15 US cents per kilogram for their product, just enough for a subsistence living. There were concerns that NCBA threatened loss of access to the local health clinics it operates in order to maintain its monopoly purchasing position. Overall control of the industry remained in the hands of the foreign trading companies, although as much as one quarter of the population relied on coffee for at least part of their income.

4. Australia as a post-colonial power in East Timor

Once UNTAET took shape from late 1999, Australia played a less prominent role in East Timor, acting in support of the UN and IFIs, rather than providing leadership within the international community. Nonetheless, Australia emerged as the dominant post-colonial power in independent East Timor, an outcome made possible by the initial military intervention. As Anderson writes, ‘Australian troops entered a power vacuum, with the aim of stabilizing and asserting control over the entire political transition.’ Politically, Australia sought the establishment of a stable government in East Timor, which would be accommodating to Australia’s strategic interests. Economically, Australia advocated the same neo-liberal policy regime as the IFIs. Economic and political concerns came together in the most controversial aspect of the East Timor-Australia relationship, the negotiations over exploitation of oil and gas deposits in the Timor sea.

Securing Australia’s strategic interests

Australia’s primary interest in post-occupation East Timor has been strategic. The collapse of Indonesian rule revived Australia’s decades old concern that an independent East Timor might align itself with a power hostile to Australia, or else become a weak state creating instability in the region. Australia therefore sought to

---

149 Interview with Tomas Freitas, 13.11.2007, Dili; Grenfell, ‘Reconstructing the coffee republic,’ p. 85.
152 These three issues are also identified by Anderson as the areas of ‘post-colonial tension’ between Australia and the East Timorese government, see Tim Anderson, ‘Timor Leste: the second Australian intervention,’ Journal of Australian Political Economy 58 (2006), p. 63.
maximise its political influence within the new country, particularly regarding defence and security issues.

Indeed, security concerns have dominated Australia’s involvement in East Timor ever since the transition to UN control in late 1999. Australia would have preferred to retain control of UNTAET’s military operations, and lobbied behind the scenes for an Australian officer to be appointed as commander, with US support.\footnote{Geoffrey Barker, ‘Push for Australian to head Timor force,’ \textit{The Australian Financial Review}, 12 November 1999, p. 13; Megan Saunders, ‘US backs Australia to lead Timor force,’ \textit{The Australian}, 6 December 1999, p. 10; Greg Sheridan, ‘Backroom bid for Timor command,’ \textit{The Australian}, 2 November 1999, p. 1.} These efforts failed, but the delay in the eventual appointment of a Philippines general meant that Australia largely retained control over planning for UNTAET.\footnote{See Smith and Dee, \textit{Peacekeeping in East Timor: The path to independence}, p. 67.} In addition, Australia continued to provide the largest component force within UNTAET and, along with close allies New Zealand, maintained control of the sensitive border regions with Indonesian West Timor.\footnote{Breen, \textit{Mission accomplished}; Smith and Dee, \textit{Peacekeeping in East Timor: The path to independence}, pp. 69, 173-176.}

The threat to Australia’s interests, however, did not only come from ongoing Indonesian and militia activity. The pattern of East Timor’s future foreign relations was not determined before the independence ballot in August 1999. Negotiations over the territory’s status were conducted by the UN, Indonesia and Portugal, which under international law remained the colonial power responsible for the territory. In later years East Timorese leaders were increasingly involved.\footnote{For accounts of Portugal’s diplomatic activities regarding East Timor, see Estêvão Cabral, ‘Portugal and East Timor: From a politics of ambivalence to a late awakening,’ \textit{Portuguese Studies Review} 11, no. 1 (2003); Paulo Gorjao, ‘The end of a cycle: Australian and Portuguese foreign policies and the fate of East Timor,’ \textit{Contemporary Southeast Asia} 23, no. Apr (2001).} But the issue was never discussed at a regional level, and Australia was never a principle party to the negotiations. In mid 1998 the Indonesians rejected an Australian offer to facilitate direct dialogue with the East Timorese, which aimed at cutting Portugal from the process.\footnote{East Timor in Transition 1998-2000: An Australian policy challenge, Canberra, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2001, pp. 25, 44-45. On East Timor as a regional issue, see Cotton, \textit{East Timor, Australia and Regional Order}, pp. 153-154.} If the self-determination process had taken place peacefully, Portugal would likely have emerged as the key player in the transition to independence, along with the UN itself.
As it was, Portugal still established considerable influence in the new country. Portugal became the second largest aid donor to East Timor behind Japan, giving over 100 million US dollars between 1999 and 2002, as well as emergency humanitarian assistance. Much of this aid was focused on education and the promotion of the Portuguese language. \(^{158}\) UNTAET included a substantial contingent of Portuguese soldiers, and Portugal helped train East Timor’s new defence force. \(^{159}\) East Timor’s new constitution was largely modeled on Portugal’s, with a mixed presidential/parliamentary system as found in several European countries. \(^{160}\) Portuguese was also chosen as the official language along with the local Tetum. This was a contentious decision, which in particular angered many younger East Timorese. \(^{161}\) The appointment of the Brazilian de Mello as head of UNTAET reinforced the impact of Portugal’s colonial legacy.

Portugal was obviously no strategic threat to Australia. But precisely because it is a distant and third rate power, Portugal’s involvement in East Timor could only serve to dilute Australia’s influence, while failing to guarantee security. East Timor’s desire to establish links with the geopolitically disparate Lusophone countries only worsened this situation, as did assertions that it was a Portuguese identity that distinguished East Timor from its Asian neighbours. \(^{162}\) That the former colonial power gained as much influence as it did was seen as regrettable by Australian commentators and, privately, officials. \(^{163}\)

---


\(^{159}\) Smith and Dee, *Peacekeeping in East Timor: The path to independence*, pp. 81-82, 177.


As discussed in Chapter Four, Australia initially gained a seat at the East Timor bargaining table through the provision of funding and personnel for UNAMET. But the real turning point came with the violent aftermath to the ballot. As the only power capable of military intervention at short notice, it was to Australia that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan turned. By leading Interfet, Australia ensured that it would be the key international player in East Timor’s future. This influence could only come at the expense of Portugal, a point not lost on commentators from both countries, despite the diplomatic denials of their respective governments.\footnote{Jill Jolliffe, ‘Downer warns of Dili dependence,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 2000, p. 8; Greg Sheridan, ‘Portugal commits to role in E Timor,’ *The Australian*, 27 May 2002, p. 2.}

Portugal, though, was only one of several countries jockeying for position in post-occupation East Timor. Fretilin’s (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) Mari Alkatiri, the first Prime Minister, actively sought trade and diplomatic links with countries from around the world.\footnote{See Anderson, ‘The second Australian intervention,’ pp. 67-70.} This included countries which are Australia’s strategic rivals in the region. In particular, Japan has been East Timor’s most consistent aid donor, contributing around US$150 million between 1999 and 2004, as well as emergency humanitarian assistance. Having made the major financial contribution to Interfet, Japan also sent nearly 700 soldiers to East Timor in March 2002.\footnote{‘Japanese aid to East Timor,’ *The La’o Hamutuk Bulletin* (online), vol. 3, no. 6, August, 2002.} Also of concern to Australia were growing links between China and East Timor.\footnote{The strategic interests at stake are outlined, somewhat overdramatically, by Kate Reid-Smith, ‘Crocodile oil: Dragon’s treasure - a possible future Southeast Asian geopolitical diaspora?’ in *The crisis in Timor-Leste: Understanding the past, imagining the future*, ed. Dennis Shoesmith, Darwin, Charles Darwin University Press, 2007.} Chinese aid has been relatively minor, totaling US$10 million up to 2002, including funding for the construction of East Timor’s Foreign Affairs building. But China also funded East Timorese students studying in Beijing, sent technical experts and medical staff to work in East Timor, and established a relatively large diplomatic mission.\footnote{‘What’s behind China’s support for East Timor?’ *The La’o Hamutuk Bulletin* (online), vol. 3, no. 4, May, 2002.} Until 2006, Alkatiri also worked to secure Chinese investment in the oil industry.\footnote{Anderson, ‘The second Australian intervention,’ p. 67.} Further minor aid contributions have come from Brazil and Cuba among others.\footnote{‘Brazilian cooperation in East Timor,’ *The La’o Hamutuk Bulletin* (online), vol. 4, nos. 3-4, August, 2003; Anderson, ‘The second Australian intervention,’ p. 73.}
To counter the influence of other powers, Australia established its own program of diplomacy and aid in East Timor. This process of securing Australia’s influence actually began before the ballot. For example, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade even provided funding for a conference on strategies for development in an independent East Timor, organised by the CNRT in Melbourne in April 1999.\(^\text{171}\) In the same month, a round of ‘second track’ negotiations between East Timorese from pro- and anti-independence factions was sponsored by a government funded think-tank at the Australian National University.\(^\text{172}\)

There was a tremendous amount of popular resentment in East Timor towards the Australian government because of its years of support for the Indonesian occupation. Increased Australian attention to the independence movement was intended to break down some of this hostility, although it is unclear how successful this was. Taudevin tells of one frosty response the Australian ambassador received in East Timor in June:

> Student leader Antero da Silva spoke to the Australian Ambassador last week in which he was asked what role Australia could play in a free East Timor.
>
> His response, was – None!!!\(^\text{173}\)

Australian diplomacy continued to be underwritten by financial aid after the ballot, and spending on East Timor totaled around A$3.9 billion in the financial years 1999-2004. Disaggregating Australian aid expenditure reveals, however, a less generous position than initially suggested. The major component of spending, nearly A$3.5 billion, was on Australia’s military and police deployment. In comparison, spending on humanitarian aid over the period was A$150 million, declining from a peak of 75 million in 1999-2000 to 35 million in 2003-04.\(^\text{174}\) In addition, it is unclear how much of the military spending, such as wages, would have been incurred without the Timor deployment.\(^\text{175}\)

---


\(^\text{174}\) Cotton, *East Timor, Australia and Regional Order*, pp. 135-136. These figures take into account UN reimbursements for peacekeeping costs. They are not directly comparable to figures given above for Japanese and Portuguese aid, which did not include emergency humanitarian assistance.

Moreover, the focus of aid spending was actually on strengthening the East Timorese state, particularly the security forces. Poverty reduction, health and education were lower priorities. For example, a breakdown of AusAID activities in East Timor starting in 2002 lists A$30 million in funding for governance projects and 40 million for police and justice, but only 19 million for health and clean water, and 15 million for education.  

The Australian military was largely responsible for training the F-FTDL, at a cost of A$26 million, and Australia has also provided arms to the new country. Australian personnel also played the major role in forming and training East Timor’s customs and border security services, particularly on the sensitive western border. In 2003, A$40 million was allocated to police force training over four years, due to concerns over rising lawlessness. Other major donors such as Japan and Portugal have spent relatively more on social and economic development, since they have no direct security interests in the country.

Australia also expects to gain direct political influence from its aid expenditure. In 2004, a number of East Timor NGOs signed a statement criticising Australia’s policy on negotiating oil and gas rights. As a result, Alexander Downer, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, cut the AusAID project funding for one of the NGOs, Forum Tau Matan, a group involved in human rights monitoring. Although the reason for the decision was not originally made known to the NGO, they were subsequently informed of the truth by the head of AusAID in East Timor. Other organisations have had funding cut for similar reasons. More subtly, NGO workers express concern that due to a lack of funding they are forced to accept the priorities of Australia and other donor countries, such as programs on good governance and human rights. But they are unable to address more controversial

---


178 For an account, see Neil Sugget, *See the road well: shaping East Timor’s frontier*, Canberra, Pandanus Books, 2005. The destabilising effect of the continuing lack of control of the border is discussed by Kingsbury, ‘East Timor border security.’


180 For a comparison, see ‘Bilateral aid.’

181 *Press release: Australia [sic] aid should support Timor-Leste, not Australia’s political interests*, La’o Hamutuk, 06.10.2005 (accessed 12.07.2007), http://www.laohamutuk.org/reports/AusAID/FTM.html); Interview with José Luis de Oliviera; Peter Ellis, ‘Lying for your country,’ *New Matilda* (online), 30 May, 2007.
issues such as national self-determination, political awareness or popular education, as they themselves would prefer.  

*Australian economic interests in East Timor*

While Australia’s primary interest in East Timor is strategic, economic interests have also affected relations between the two countries. This has taken three forms. First, individual Australian businesses have benefited from commercial opportunities in East Timor. Second, the Australian government has supported the IFI’s push for neo-liberal policies. Finally, negotiations between Australia and East Timor over the exploitation of oil and gas deposits in the Timor Sea have proved highly contentious, an issue discussed separately below.

Due to its extremely small and underdeveloped economy, East Timor rated just 110th by value among Australia’s trading partners in 2005-2006. However, Australia is the largest foreign investor in East Timor, along with Singapore. Australian businesses moved to fill some of the gap left by the departure from East Timor of their Indonesian counterparts. Many substantial businesses were quickly established by Australian firms, for example a number of car rental, hospitality and retail enterprises in Dili. Major Australian corporations rapidly entered the East Timorese market, including Westpac, Multiplex and Harvey Norman.

Some Australian ventures, though, involved carpet baggers of the worst sort, particularly in the early days of the UN transition. The most high profile case was that of the Dili Lodge hotel, established by a Darwin car salesman along with other investors including Liberal Party figure Shane Stone. The hotel and bar took over premises formerly occupied by the Indonesian military. But legally, all such property had been transferred to the control of the UN, which eventually evicted the hotel operators. A number of Australian businesses were also targeted for industrial action over low wages and poor working conditions.

---

182 Interview with an anonymous NGO worker in East Timor; Interview with Setyo Budi, 08.11.2007, Dili; Interview with José Luis de Oliviera; Interview with Nuno Rodriguez.


185 Ibid., pp. 25-27; David Nason, ‘Lodging a licence to print money, and a tax on Dili conscience,’ *The Australian*, 14 December 1999, p. 3.

The UN’s reconstruction program in East Timor proved an especially lucrative opportunity for Australian businesses. Darwin based companies in particular benefited from their proximity to Timor in supplying construction supplies, vehicles and the like, as well as undertaking a significant proportion of UN tendered reconstruction projects.\(^{187}\) This business activity had political backing, with both the Northern Territory and Federal governments encouraging Australian businesses to compete for a share of the UN reconstruction budget.\(^{188}\)

Australia’s leadership of Interfet also helped Australian business benefit from reconstruction, not least because of the basing and supply of troops from Darwin, and because, as a matter of course, much of Australia’s economic and military aid was actually to be spent in Australia.\(^{189}\) Security firm Chubb Protective Services progressed from servicing the UN and aid organisations in Darwin to establishing a lucrative business in Dili.\(^{190}\) Telstra, Australia’s largest telecommunications company, benefited even more directly from Interfet, being granted a contract to supply communication services to the military operation. They were then granted a short term monopoly by the UN to provide East Timor’s telephone service, although it seems likely that this arrangement breached Indonesian law, which remained in force in East Timor under UNTAET.\(^{191}\) Telstra’s performance was also judged to be poor, and a Portuguese company was awarded an ongoing contract to provide telephony services in 2002.\(^{192}\)

The Australian government has also taken a keen interest in the development of East Timor’s economic policy, and has been a strong supporter of the IFIs’ neo-liberal program in East Timor. On the eve of East Timorese independence, Howard stated that


\(^{190}\) Aditjondro, *Timor Lorosa’e on the crossroad*, pp. 33.


It is not official overseas aid that is the key to future prosperity... It is business investment and a more open world trading system… Those two things are more important and can bring more prospect of rises in living standards than superficial overseas aid.\footnote{Geoffrey Barker and Tim Dodd, ‘PM’s tough message for Timor,’ \textit{Australian Financial Review}, 20 May 2002, p. 1.}


This neo-liberal rhetoric has been implemented through direct involvement in East Timor’s administration. Australia provided finance advisors to assist in drawing up the 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 budgets, as well as helping to develop the taxation system.\footnote{\textit{East Timor in Transition 1998-2000}, pp. 162-163.} As with the IFIs, Australia was keen to prevent the ‘unsustainable’ government spending of the Indonesian era, in part to reduce dependency on Australian aid. These early budgeting exercises under international observation were seen as ‘pivotal in exposing East Timor’s future leaders to… one of the key challenges of governance: reconciling core programmes of government with fiscal realities.’\footnote{Ibid.}


Australian aid for projects improving governance in East Timor has already been mentioned. But Australia’s vision of ‘good governance’ is not politically neutral. It is based on neo-liberal assumptions that government involvement in the economy should be minimised, and that the private market is the key to economic growth and poverty reduction. An AusAID document on governance, released in 2000, argues that through Australia’s aid program ‘Efforts must be made to develop the institutional environment needed for the effective operation of a liberal market economy…’\footnote{\textit{Good governance: Guiding principles for implementation}, AusAID, 2000, p. 7. See also Paul Simons, Gayle Hart, and Cliff Walsh, \textit{One clear objective: Poverty reduction through sustainable development}, AusAID, 1997, pp. 4, 6. This issue is explored in more detail in Chapter Seven.} Governance programs implemented in the South Pacific up to this
point had included support for tariff reductions and implementation of World Bank economic reforms.\footnote{\textit{Good governance: Guiding principles for implementation}, pp. 7, 11.}

Australia has been particularly keen that East Timor maintain an open trading and investment regime, ensuring Timor remains accessible to Australian business.\footnote{See Anderson, ‘Aid, trade and oil: Australia’s second betrayal of East Timor,’ pp. 116-117; Anderson, ‘Independent development in Timor-Leste?’ p. 71-72.} However, given East Timor’s small economy, the direct economic benefit from this openness will only be significant for a few individual companies or businesspeople, with the exception of oil and gas exploitation. As with the IFIs, therefore, Australia’s primary interest in fostering neo-liberalism in East Timor appears to be as a practical demonstration of its favoured economic policies.

In particular, one of Australia’s main concerns in international trade negotiations is to reduce trade barriers on agricultural products. To promote this agenda, Australia has helped to form the ‘Cairns group’ of agricultural exporters. The group includes both developed and developing countries, and part of Australia’s rhetoric has been to argue that free trade in agriculture will benefit developing nations.\footnote{See \textit{Trade Statement}, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2007, pp. 50-52.} As with the World Bank, Australia has applied this logic to East Timor, supporting agricultural development based on cash crops, and opposing government controlled infrastructure development.\footnote{Anderson, ‘Food security and agriculture in the Australia-East Timor relationship,’ pp. 186-189.} A practical demonstration of its market principles could bolster Australia’s arguments for free trade, and a supportive East Timorese regime might also become an ally in international negotiations. On the other hand, allowing East Timor to follow a development strategy based on public investment and protected markets would undermine Australia’s bargaining position.

\textit{The negotiations over oil and gas deposits}

East Timor’s only real prospect for substantial economic development in the foreseeable future lies in sizeable oil and gas deposits located in the Timor Sea. In 2004 Mari Alkatiri described negotiations with Australia over oil and gas as ‘a matter of life and death for our nation’.\footnote{Cited in Anderson, ‘The second Australian intervention,’ pp. 66.} Xanana Gusmão also argued that oil revenues were necessary to prevent East Timor becoming a failed state.\footnote{David Fickling, ‘Timorese fury at ‘immoral oil grab’,’ \textit{The Guardian}, 19 April 2004, p. 14.} If Australia intervened in East Timor out of concern for the wellbeing of the population and a
desire to support self-determination, it could have been expected that this generosity would flow into arrangements for the exploitation of the Timor Sea deposits. Instead, Australia engaged in a highly contentious process of negotiations lasting until 2006, which left East Timor billions of dollars poorer than it might have expected.205

As discussed in Chapter Two, Australia and Indonesia did not finalise their boundary in the area known as the ‘Timor Gap’, instead agreeing to share royalties on oil and gas deposits within a ‘zone of cooperation’. This arrangement was put into question by the independence ballot, and negotiations on a new agreement began in 2000. The resulting Timor Sea Treaty was signed by the respective governments the day after East Timor’s independence. Under the arrangement, the ‘Area A’ of the old system was renamed the Joint Petroleum Development Area (JPDA), but the percentage split in revenues was revised from the previous 50-50 division to 90-10, in East Timor’s favour.206 The treaty was ratified by East Timor in 2002.

However, the treaty did not address the issue of several oil and gas fields which lay at least partly outside of the JPDA. East Timor maintained that these fields would substantially or wholly come under its control if the boundary with Australia was based on the midway point between the two countries, and if lateral boundaries with Indonesia were also redrawn according to recent developments in international law, in effect widening the ‘Timor Gap’. For its part, Australia argued that any border should be based on Australia’s extensive continental shelf. This formed the basis of those sections of the permanent border negotiated with Indonesia in 1972, borders which Australia insisted could not be revised. At stake were the Luminaria-Coralina fields in the west, which were already in production, and the very sizeable Greater Sunrise field to the east. In all, it was estimated that East Timor stood to lose as much as US$8 billion in revenues over the production life of the Timor Sea fields.207

Australia, though, refused to negotiate on the border issue, instead pressuring the East Timorese to agree that Greater Sunrise should be ‘unitised’ on the basis of 80%


206 The other areas in the agreement with Indonesia were abandoned.

of the field lying within Australia’s zone of exclusive control, and 20% within the JPDA. In March 2002, Australia withdrew from the territorial adjudication functions of International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea, which represented East Timor’s most likely avenue for a favourable settlement of the border issue. To increase the pressure Australia also delayed ratification of the Timor Sea Treaty until March 2003, when ratification was rushed through parliament to prevent the collapse of a commercial arrangement for sale of gas from the area. Meanwhile, Australia continued to collect all the revenue from the Laminaria-Coralina field, amounting to over US$1 billion between 1999 and 2005.\(^{208}\)

The relative merits of the opposing legal positions are not discussed in this thesis.\(^{209}\) What is important here are the tactics used by Australia to exert its authority over East Timor. By withdrawing from legal adjudication, Australia shifted the field of negotiations decisively in its favour, since it is by far the wealthier, more powerful nation. In particular, Australia could afford to use stalling tactics, because the income from the Timor Sea was far more important to East Timor than to its prosperous neighbour. This position of strength was openly exploited by Foreign Minister Downer during negotiations, who at one point told Alkatiri that ‘We are not going to [re]negotiate the Timor Sea Treaty - understand that… We are very tough… Let me give you a tutorial in politics - not a chance.’\(^{210}\) The Australian negotiating team also repeatedly referred to Australia’s military assistance to East Timor in 1999, a not so subtle reminder of the latter’s strategic weakness at a time when a bilateral security agreement covering the Timor Sea was also under discussion.\(^{211}\)

Downer defended his position in terms of the national interest, saying ‘We will do what we believe to be right, but, of course, in our interests, we are on Australia’s side. I’m the Australian Foreign Minister.’\(^{212}\) This was not just a question of the revenues directly at stake. Perhaps more importantly, Australia feared that allowing

\(^{208}\) Anderson, ‘The second Australian intervention,’ p. 65.

\(^{209}\) A detailed account of the legal arguments can be found in Schofield, ‘A ‘fair go’ for East Timor? Sharing the resources of the Timor Sea.’; Schofield and Arsana, ‘The delimitation of maritime boundaries: a matter of ‘life and death’ for East Timor?’


\(^{211}\) Interview with José Teixeira. See also Alexander Munton, *A study of the offshore petroleum negotiations between Australia, the U.N. and East Timor*, PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 2006, pp. 199-200.

East Timor’s claims would give Indonesia an excuse to reopen the entire 1972 border agreement. Moreover, if the border dispute had been finally resolved in East Timor’s favour, the new nation might then have applied pressure for oil companies to develop processing facilities in East Timor. The Alkatiri government attempted to insert various provisions for this sort of development into its agreement with Australia, but these were staunchly resisted, on the grounds that they were purely commercial decisions. Despite this free market rhetoric, in 2002 the Northern Territory government proposed providing A$200 million in subsidies to oil companies in order to secure onshore processing facilities. Eventually, a processing plant was constructed in Darwin, with direct economic benefits estimated at A$80 million per year, as well as the advantages of a ready supply of energy for industrial development.

Ultimately, the Australian government backed away from its original hard-line position, and a new agreement was signed in February 2006. The JPDA split of 90-10 remained, while revenues from Greater Sunrise will be shared evenly. No permanent border will be set for a further 50 years, by which time the oil and gas deposits will have been fully exploited. The chief benefit of this arrangement for Australia is that it serves to maintain the status quo of Australia’s borders with Indonesia.

There are several other factors which may also have contributed to the shift in Australia’s position. The Timorese government threatened to unilaterally grant new exploration rights. There was also a high profile campaign in Australia favouring a more generous settlement, including television advertisements featuring Australian veterans of the World War Two campaign in Timor. Moreover the Australian government may have decided it was better to channel money to the East Timorese government through oil and gas revenues, rather than directly supporting it through

---

213 Munton, A study, p. 148; Interview with José Teixeira.
214 Interview with José Teixeira. See also Munton, A study, pp. 211-212.
aid. The need to avoid creating a ‘failed state’ was an argument used by the Labor opposition against the government’s position.\textsuperscript{218} It is also likely that this is why Australia agreed to the 90-10 split in the JPDA in the first place. Downer explicitly linked oil royalties with the level of Australian aid, and aid flows declined substantially in the year after the initial deal was signed.\textsuperscript{219} Grenfell’s suggestion that Australia wished to keep East Timor dependent on Australian aid for strategic reasons is therefore unlikely,\textsuperscript{220} especially since the extreme poverty of the country has since proven a strategic liability. Finally, Australia may have been concerned that the dispute not disrupt commercial activities, including those of Australian company Woodside, which is responsible for development of the Greater Sunrise field.

\textit{Questioning Australian altruism}

Even under the 2006 agreement, East Timor lost several billion US dollars in revenues to which it had laid claim. Australia’s ‘extra’ share of oil revenue was greater than what it paid to East Timor in aid in the early years of independence.\textsuperscript{221} Writing before this agreement was struck, Cotton argues that in Australia’s position on the Timor Sea negotiations, ‘the former altruistic approach to East Timor appears to have been eclipsed through the application of a narrowly pragmatic calculus.’\textsuperscript{222} It should rather make us question whether Australia’s supposed humanitarian concern was ever more than ‘fake generosity’.\textsuperscript{223} From the time the issue of East Timor’s self-determination was reopened in 1998, through to the UN transition and independence, Australia consistently put its own national interests above the wellbeing of the Timorese people, and their ability to determine the future path of their nation. The following chapter presents an alternative explanation for Australia’s seemingly contradictory actions.

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{220} Grenfell, ‘Nation-building and the politics of oil in East Timor,’ p. 48.
\textsuperscript{222} Cotton, \textit{East Timor, Australia and Regional Order}, p. 109.
\end{footnotes}
Chapter Six

The East Timor Intervention and Australian Imperialism

The first section of this chapter argues that Australia’s intervention in East Timor was not primarily motivated by humanitarian concerns or by domestic political pressures, but rather by the need to ensure ongoing stability in East Timor in the face of dramatic political change in the Indonesian archipelago. As such, it continued Australia’s long-term policy towards the territory. The chapter then considers how the intervention has affected Australia’s foreign and defence policies, including relations with Indonesia and the United States. Finally, the domestic political impact of the intervention is examined, and the success or failure of the intervention is assessed.

1. Why did Australia intervene in East Timor in 1999?

The present section draws together the evidence and arguments presented in the preceding five chapters to explain why Australia intervened in East Timor. This necessarily involves some repetition, but bibliographical details have generally not been repeated, nor has reference been made to the chapters in which the material was first presented.

*The argument against existing explanations*

There are two main explanations offered for Australia’s 1999 intervention in East Timor. Generally, the intervention has been seen as driven by self-evident humanitarian concerns. This was the public position of the Howard government itself, and has been popular in mainstream academic accounts. The most subtle work in this vein is that of James Cotton. He explores the importance of wider issues such as regional stability, noting that ‘humanitarian questions at best [served] as [the]
trigger for addressing international and regional issues of longer standing.¹ But ultimately Cotton returns to the intervention’s inherent moral purpose, arguing that of the several factors in the government’s decision

The most important – indeed a factor that is hard to overemphasize – was the assuaging of Australian guilt for the long complicity in Jakarta’s policy of repression and integration. A human rights disaster had unfolded on Australia’s doorstep, and not only was it ignored but Australia also helped to train the very forces responsible.²

In contrast, a more Left-wing position holds that a popular movement demanding intervention in East Timor forced the Australian government to act against its wishes. Most influential has been Clinton Fernandes, who argues

It is important to dispel illusions about how and why the troops were sent in. They were not sent in because of the goodwill of the Australian government, but because of massive protests that increased rapidly in both size and fury.³

The Australian government would rather have supported Indonesian attempts to retain control of East Timor, but instead ‘the government was forced to turn against an ally it had supported even after the victory of the independence forces had been announced.’⁴

Their different ultimate explanations for Australia’s intervention notwithstanding, there are underlying similarities between the ‘humanitarian’ and ‘popular pressure’ positions. Both view the intervention as a self-evidently positive development in Australian foreign policy, but one which was driven by forces outside the normal foreign policy making process. Both emphasise that the intervention was a break with past policy, and both accord prime importance to the idealism and moral concerns of (differing) Australian political actors.

Although illuminating certain aspects of the intervention, neither of the two main existing explanations is wholly satisfactory. There are several problems with the contention that the government intervened primarily because it wanted to relieve the suffering of the Timorese people. First, the numbers of people killed in East Timor in

---

² Ibid., p. 100.
⁴ Ibid., p. 114.
1999 was far fewer than the numbers killed in the initial years of the Indonesian occupation. Successive Australian governments showed little regard for the wellbeing of the East Timorese for nearly 25 years. It is implausible that humanitarian concerns would suddenly become the driving force of Australian policy, and why this might be the case has not been explained.

Second, the humanitarian benefits of Australia’s military operations were not as great as most accounts assume. Interfet (International Force for East Timor) did not compel the Indonesian military to leave East Timor; they began to withdraw well before the arrival of Australian forces. The intervention therefore came too late to stop the majority of killings, which were already in decline, and most of the physical destruction and looting had already occurred. Moreover, humanitarian concerns were not the first priority for Australian forces once they were in place. Instead, Australia’s priorities appear to have been, in order of decreasing importance: preventing Australian causalities; avoiding clashes with Indonesian regular forces and, to some extent, the militias; establishing unchallenged control over an area once they had replaced Indonesian regular forces; and distributing humanitarian aid. These priorities meant that the destruction of property continued after the arrival of Australian forces in Dili, and that the forced deportation of refugees to Indonesia was not immediately halted. As Nevins puts it, the intervention ‘provided the TNI [Indonesian Armed Forces] with the space and time to carry out and finish its final campaign of terror and destruction, and then to depart unscathed.’

Finally, Australia’s supposed generosity was discredited by its subsequent conduct towards East Timor. Both during the transitional United Nations (UN) regime, and following the country’s formal independence, Australia consistently supported the imposition of a neo-liberal economic policy framework in East Timor. This model ran counter to the wishes of many East Timorese political leaders as well as the general population, and has limited the new nation’s ability to determine its own path to economic development. Most notable, however, was Australia’s stance during negotiations on seabed oil and gas resources in the Timor Sea. Australia followed a self-declared policy of national self-interest, using its economic and political strength to secure maximum financial benefit from the development of these resources. Even

---

following a partial back-down by the Howard government, East Timor was deprived of several billion US dollars of revenue to which it might legally have been entitled, as well as losing the possibility of hosting production facilities.

Writing from a Left-wing populist standpoint, Fernandes has no illusions that the Howard government was acting altruistically by intervening in East Timor. Instead, he argues that the policy was forced on the government by a mass movement of the Australian public. This movement brought thousands of people onto the streets in rallies from September 6th, peaking in rallies of between 20 and 30,000 people each on September 10th and 11th in Melbourne and Sydney respectively. A range of unions also took industrial action.

In fact, the movement was larger than the examples provided by Fernandes indicate. Nonetheless, it did not have the influence he suggests. The final decision to launch a military intervention was made by the National Security Committee on September 6th and 7th, too early to have been affected by the major demonstrations and industrial action Fernandes cites. Preparations for some sort of military intervention had in fact begun months earlier. While originally intended only to evacuate foreign personnel, these plans were rapidly adapted as the basis for a full scale military intervention from September 5th. For diplomatic reasons, however, these preparations were kept secret until the Indonesian government agreed to accept an Australian led intervention force on September 12th. This apparent tardiness fuelled popular discontent in Australia, and from differing political positions, both Cotton and Fernandes criticise the Howard government for being slow to prepare for the intervention. But Australian forces failed to prevent the destruction of Timor, not because of delays in making an otherwise good policy, but because that policy was never primarily intended to ‘save’ the East Timorese population.

Additionally, it must be questioned what size and social weight a popular movement would require to have the dramatic impact on policy making described by Fernandes. Support for the Indonesian occupation for East Timor was a cornerstone of Australian foreign policy for a quarter century, withstanding long term public opposition. It is unlikely that any protest movement could overturn it in a matter of days, particularly when the focus of industrial action was on Indonesian rather than

---

6 Cotton sees incompetence, Fernandes malevolence. Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, pp. 113-124; Fernandes, Reluctant saviour, pp. 95-114.
Australian business interests. The difficulties involved are illustrated by other social movements of greater size than that in favour of intervention in East Timor, which have nonetheless had limited impact on government decision making.

This is not to deny that the East Timor solidarity campaigns, both in Australia and elsewhere, played an important role in East Timor’s eventual independence. For years, the efforts of relatively small numbers of activists who supported East Timorese self-determination ensured that the issue never entirely disappeared from the public gaze. This was a direct challenge to Western governments, particularly Australia, which viewed East Timor’s incorporation into Indonesia as an irreversible fact, and would have preferred the issue to fade from public attention. Such activism was a major factor in the Portuguese government’s ongoing if sometimes half-hearted advocacy of East Timor’s rights in the international arena, and in the ongoing interest of the US Congress in the issue.

In Australia, the solidarity campaign was a thorn in the side of successive governments which sought to construct closer ties with the Suharto dictatorship. As discussed in Chapter Two, public consternation over human rights abuses in Indonesia in general, and East Timor in particular, complicated this task. For example it made it impossible for Suharto to visit Australia because of the protests which would inevitably ensue. The ability to ‘normalise’ relations by removing this irritant contributed to the desire of both the Indonesian and Australian governments to find a new, internationally acceptable solution to the East Timor situation.

Discontent within Labor party ranks also helped prompt the party’s change of position on the issue under Brereton’s leadership. Finally, the strong public response in Australia to East Timor’s evident suffering in 1999 was built on a foundation of gradually increasing public and media dissatisfaction with Australia’s policy over the preceding decade, especially after the Santa Cruz massacre.

But although the Australian intervention in 1999 had overwhelming public support, this support was not its most important proximate cause. A failure to intervene would have been politically costly. But domestic political considerations were of secondary importance in the government’s decision making. Nor was there as complete and dramatic a reversal of policy on East Timor as Fernandes makes out. Rather, it was the culmination of a series of policy shifts dating from November 1998 at the latest,
as described below. Again, while these shifts were certainly popular with the Australian public, they were not dictated by this popularity.

**Australian imperialism and the intervention in East Timor**

This thesis has developed an understanding of Australia as an imperialist nation, in which the state promotes the interests of the Australian ruling class within a world system of generalised interstate conflict. This system produces a logic of strategic competition which cannot be reduced to immediate economic interests. Strategic concerns have always dominated Australian policy towards the Indonesian archipelago, due to the fear that major powers will use the region as a base to directly threaten Australia, or to cut off vital lines of trade and communications. This concern has generally been expressed as a need to ‘maintain stability’ in the region. From World War Two onwards, East Timor has appeared in this context as a weak point, both susceptible to penetration by major powers hostile to Australia, and a possible source of instability which could spread throughout the archipelago. In part, Australia supported the Indonesian occupation of East Timor to address this threat. The military intervention in East Timor in 1999 was another act of Australian imperialism. It was carried out neither because of the humanitarian concerns of the government, nor because of popular pressure, but rather to secure Australia’s longstanding strategic interests in the territory. A Marxist critique of the intervention as being fundamentally imperialist in nature has not previously been developed at length. At the time, such criticism was only mounted by politically insignificant radical Left-wing organisations. No academic works have been written from this perspective, although Nevins makes a similar argument regarding US involvement in East Timor in 1999. Some of the key strategic issues have also been touched on from a realist perspective. In addition, Hugh White has written an account of the decision making process, based on his experience as the then Deputy Secretary in the

---


Department of Defence. Although working from a very different perspective to this thesis, White does similarly highlight the conflicting strategic policy imperatives confronting Australia in 1999.10

By September 1999 Australia could no longer rely on Indonesia to protect its interests in East Timor, because the Habibie government’s control over the territory had become untenable. The Asian financial crisis unleashed popular discontent with the Suharto regime and, as his successor, Habibie needed to make concessions to demands for democratic reforms. These were also insisted upon by the international donors and financial institutions which were now supplying Indonesia with vital financial assistance. Just as importantly, Suharto’s downfall brought a renewed upsurge of resistance to Indonesian rule in East Timor. With the military politically disoriented, the Timorese independence movement was able to operate far more openly, and at times demonstrations and strikes even challenged for physical control of the territory. Pressured on all sides, Habibie responded by granting East Timor an act of self-determination.

Habibie and the Indonesian military probably initially thought that they could engineer a victory for the option of autonomy within Indonesia, or at least ensure that the result was close enough to be disputed. But by the time the vote was held it was already clear that the military’s campaign of terror had failed. The Indonesian government, including the military leadership, seems to have gradually become resigned to the inevitable loss of the territory, an attitude reinforced by the overwhelming vote for independence. However, the military was determined to make the Timorese pay a high price for their independence, leading to the campaign of killing, forced deportations and physical destruction. This policy was designed to save face for the Indonesian military, as well as provide a warning to separatist movements in the rest of the country.

Indonesian troops began withdrawing from East Timor from as early as September 5th, just days after the announcement of the ballot result, and before Habibie agreed to an international intervention force. The very thoroughness of the scorched earth policy indicates their departure was to be permanent. Among civilian politicians,

other more important issues soon took priority over East Timor. While there was still significant popular sentiment backing Indonesian occupation of the territory, neither Habibie nor his political rivals attempted to mobilise this support, or even opposed ratifying the outcome of the independence ballot, as discussed further below. Fernandes is therefore incorrect in arguing that Indonesia was attempting to use genocide to reverse the ballot result. One way or another, Indonesian rule in East Timor was at an end.

With the breakup of the former Yugoslavia serving as a recent model for post-Cold War strategic fears, Indonesia’s political upheaval and the independence ballot in East Timor raised, for the Australian government, the spectre of the ‘Balkanisation’ of the Indonesian archipelago. East Timor thus became the focal point for fears about an ‘arc of instability’ that arose due to the social and political turmoil engendered by the Asian economic crisis. Leading analyst Paul Dibb summed up the situation:

The archipelago which stretches from Indonesia through Papua New Guinea to the small Pacific island nations to our east is potentially highly unstable.

And across the Tasman Sea our ally New Zealand is becoming more of a long-term strategic liability than it is a partner.

The possibility that the Indonesian state might disintegrate completely was soon downplayed by calmer heads. But it nonetheless became the common sense of the policy community that Australia faced a degenerating strategic environment due to the ‘instability’ of neighbouring countries. As always, the ultimate concern was the possibility of major powers hostile to Australia gaining influence in the region, most

---


likely China.\(^\text{14}\) East Timor was not only the most pressing example of this instability in itself. It was also seen as a potential trigger for a domino effect in which Aceh, West Papua or other ‘restive provinces’ would follow its example and attempt to break away from Indonesia, which in turn would lead to trouble in Papua New Guinea and beyond.

The Australian government was evidently concerned over the links between East Timor’s independence and wider regional instability. In February, for example, Howard argued in favour of East Timor accepting autonomy within Indonesia on the grounds that otherwise

there would be an inherent instability. There would be an economic and strategic vulnerability. There would be the potential for, I think, ongoing tension between Indonesia and the independent East Timor…\(^\text{15}\)

Under a differing ideological trope, the problems of 1974-1975 were suddenly revived. If the danger of ‘Communism’ no longer loomed, the underlying security threat posed by a small and weak neighbour was of no less concern.\(^\text{16}\)

But in 1999, Australia was forced to play the leading role in securing stability in East Timor. Once it was recognised that Indonesia could no longer maintain its occupation, it was essential to Australia that an orderly transfer of sovereignty took place, avoiding a destabilising power vacuum. In addition, Australia’s position as a strategic leader in the region would be threatened if its policy was outpaced by events on the ground, particularly Canberra’s standing with policy makers in the United States.\(^\text{17}\)

As White recollects,


\(^{16}\) This comparison is also made by White, ‘The road to INTERFET,’ p. 73.

it was recognised that if a major PKF [peace keeping force] was required, it would be in Australia’s interests to play a major role. We knew that Australia would have much at stake directly in the stability and viability of an independent East Timor. Moreover international opinion would expect Australia to take a lead; there was a sense that if Australia didn’t lead, no one else would.\(^{18}\)

The Howard government had recognised the need for a change in policy by late 1998. But Australia was being excluded from negotiations over the territory’s future. Portugal was the key third party in UN negotiations between Indonesia and the pro-independence CNRT (National Council for Timorese Resistance), and might have retained the dominant post-colonial position in East Timor had the transition to independence been peaceful. In the event however, Indonesia’s scorched earth policy dramatically changed this balance of power. In one sense, the destruction represented Canberra’s worst case scenario, as a more chaotic transition could hardly be imagined. It would therefore go too far to argue that Australia actually favoured Indonesia’s policy, although it was indirectly aided by Australia’s diplomacy.

But ultimately the destruction did result in major advantages for Australia. Indonesia’s destruction of East Timor following the independence ballot was not an attempt to retain the territory, but rather aimed to impose as high a cost as possible for separation, in order to warn off the other provinces. This was also of benefit to Australia. More directly, Indonesia’s rampage paved the way for Australia to become the most influential foreign country in post-Indonesian East Timor. Most obviously, it provided the opening for Australia’s direct military involvement in the territory.

Only Canberra had the ability and motivation to insert forces with such speed, and its leading role ensured that Australia’s interests could no longer be ignored by the UN or Portugal. The international military intervention also ensured that the transition to independence went as smoothly as possible. Without it, the CNRT and Falintil (Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor) would probably have brought the territory under their control eventually, as indeed they had in some areas before the arrival of Australian forces. But their authority would have been less absolute and would have taken longer to establish than that provided by the

---

\(^{18}\) White, ‘The road to INTERFET,’ p. 4.
overwhelming firepower of the Australian military. The instability feared by Australia would have been deepened and prolonged.

Moreover, a CNRT regime established by its own efforts would have been in a far stronger position to determine East Timor’s direction during the transitional period. As it was, the independence movement became the junior partner to the UN, the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and international donors. In particular, they were unable to resist the introduction of a neo-liberal economic framework which was unpopular in East Timor, but favoured by Australia and other financial donor nations. The intervention also allowed Australia, in the words of one East Timorese activist, to ‘come as angels, to come as gods, to come and save East Timor’.\(^\text{19}\) Prior to this, as the most prominent international supporter of the Indonesian occupation, Australia’s public image within East Timor could hardly have been worse. Popular gratitude for the Australian intervention meant its subsequent involvement in the territory was more politically acceptable than it otherwise would have been.

The political advantages accorded to Australia by the intervention were then built on by substantial diplomatic and financial involvement, both during the UN transitional regime and after East Timor became fully independent. These efforts were in part aimed at combating the influence of other nations, including Portugal, China, Brazil and Cuba. They have also addressed Australia’s ongoing concerns over security in the new country. Even after the UN took control of security arrangements, the Australian military retained a major security function, including in planning for UN operations. Australian financial aid has been disproportionately directed towards strengthening East Timorese state institutions. In particular Australia took on much of the responsibility and expense for training the East Timorese police force and military, as well as the establishment of border security arrangements.

Finally, it is worth considering the role of economic interests. This thesis has employed a Marxist understanding of imperialism, in which inter-state rivalries are ultimately based upon economic competition between national blocs of capital. However, this economic condition gives rise to a global system of inter-state strategic rivalry in which the particular actions of nation states cannot be reduced to direct economic interests. It has further been argued that Australia’s imperialist

interests in Southeast Asia are primarily of such a strategic nature, and that they constituted the prime motivation for Australia’s historical support for Indonesia’s occupation of East Timor.

Once again in 1999, strategic concerns were the most important consideration for the Australian government. As has been discussed in previous chapters, oil companies were concerned that developments in East Timor did not prejudice their existing investments. BHP sought assurances in this regard from the East Timorese independence movement before the referendum, as did the Australian government. Oil companies likewise pressed the Australian and East Timorese governments to resolve their differences over the Timor Sea arrangements without wasting too much time. They were concerned that the political transition not upset their activities. However, there is no evidence that these companies applied pressure which resulted in Australia’s shift in policy to support East Timor’s independence or subsequently intervene militarily in the territory. From the point of view of the Australian state, then, providing investment stability was a concern, but one of secondary importance compared with the political and military aspects of East Timor’s transition to independence. Finally, it must be considered that the intervention was financially very costly to Australia, while no substantial additional economic benefits were gained compared to maintaining the status quo of the Indonesian occupation.

Nonetheless, despite the primacy of strategic concerns, Australia has also advanced its economic interests in post-Indonesian East Timor. The promotion of neoliberalism in East Timor has provided investment opportunities for some Australian companies. Perhaps more importantly, Australia wanted East Timor’s development policies to conform to its own favoured economic doctrines, maintaining consistency, for example, with Australia’s support for global free trade in agricultural products. This ideological motivation was also evident among the IFIs. But Australia’s most significant economic interest in East Timor is the oil and gas resources in the Timor Sea. As already mentioned, the Howard government attempted to maximise Australia’s gains from these resources, at East Timor’s expense. These negotiations made clear the interconnection between economic and strategic interests, as Australia used its role as military guarantor of East Timor’s independence as a bargaining chip.
The Australian intervention in historical context

Compared to most existing accounts, the present argument places far greater importance on the underlying consistencies in Australian policy, despite the eventual abandonment of support for the Indonesian occupation. Up to the point when troops were actually inserted into East Timor, Australian policy was essentially reactive and made on the run, responding to rapidly changing events in Indonesia and East Timor which were beyond its control. Yet while these changes obviously brought a dramatic shift in Australian policy at one level, focusing exclusively on these changes can obscure deeper strategic continuities.

An analogy can be usefully drawn with Australia’s attitude towards Indonesian independence after World War Two. With the post-war collapse of Dutch authority, Australia’s previous reliance on European colonialism was replaced by support for moderate Asian nationalism. Yet the pre-war strategic goals of regional stability and the defence of Australia’s northern approaches were fundamentally unchanged. So too was the racial-strategic mindset that Asia represented a threat to the security of (white) Australia.

Similarly, in 1998-1999 a period of political upheaval in Indonesia forced a change in the outward form of Australian policy towards East Timor, without any change in its underlying motivations. Maintaining stability throughout the Indonesian archipelago remained Australia’s primary, overarching goal at all times. This highlights the danger, discussed in Chapters Two and Four, of fetishising specific aspects of Australia’s foreign policy, such as the ‘relationship’ with Indonesia, or support for the occupation of East Timor. These are specific tactics for gaining Australia’s wider strategic goals, not ahistorical goals in themselves, and hence they can be dispensed with if they are no longer useful. The 1999 intervention was therefore an extraordinary episode in Australia’s foreign relations, but it does not need to be explained by the introduction of any new political objectives, nor by the implausible intrusion of abnormal political actors into the traditional realm of foreign policy making.

To argue that the intervention fulfilled the same goals as support for the Indonesian occupation does not mean, however, that the government was eager to abandon its former position. Support for the occupation had been a relatively successful policy since 1974, and to this must be added the natural aversion to embracing a risky new
military and diplomatic strategy. Most importantly, Australia’s specific interests in
East Timor had to be continually balanced with the long-term goal of maintaining
good relations with Indonesia, which was never abandoned. 20 This demanded, for
example, that Australia continue to recognise Indonesia’s sovereignty over East
Timor. Even when it seemed clear that autonomy would be rejected, the desire to
maintain relations with Indonesia also limited the military preparations which could
be made ahead of the September ballot, and those that were made had to be kept
secret. For the same reason, Australia publicly rejected the need for a UN
peacekeeping force in East Timor before the ballot, despite knowing that Indonesia
was responsible for the militia violence. Diplomatic concerns were also evident in
the conduct of Australia’s military operations. The spread of Australian control over
East Timor was deliberately slow and coordinated with the withdrawal of the
Indonesian military, in order to avoid politically damaging clashes.

Initially, Australia’s own preferred option was for Indonesia to maintain some form
of control over East Timor. But, however reluctantly, Australia was forced to accept
the changed political reality in East Timor, just as was Indonesia itself. A
departmental review of the situation concluded in late 1998 that the status quo of the
Indonesian occupation could no longer be maintained. Howard’s response was the
December 21st letter to Habibie recommending he follow France’s example in
granting autonomy to New Caledonia. He was attempting to ensure the transition to
autonomy, and to any eventual independence, would be as smooth and drawn out as
possible. It was not an unrealistic manoeuvre, since many independence leaders
supported similar proposals at the time. But the proposal was made redundant by
Habibie’s decision to bring the impasse in Timor to a rapid resolution.

Moreover, it soon became clear that Habibie’s offer of autonomy would be rejected.
Australia was fully aware of this and adjusted its policy in response, abandoning
support for ongoing Indonesian sovereignty in East Timor as it became clear that it
was no longer a realistic option. Certainly, it should not be suggested that the
Howard government envisaged the magnitude or nature of the intervention more than
a few weeks before it was launched, at the very earliest. But the final decision to
intervene militarily was the logical culmination of policy changes going back 10

20 On the difficulty of managing these conflicting priorities, see White, ‘The road to INTERFET,’ p. 76.
months. The government sought to build links with the East Timorese independence movement as early as the middle of 1998, including holding regular discussions with Xanana Gusmão while he was still in prison. As already discussed, contingency plans were made for a military response. Again, for diplomatic reasons, Australia could not publicly acknowledge that the autonomy proposal would be defeated. But eventually they came close. In February, Howard was still arguing strongly that East Timor should choose to remain part of Indonesia. But soon the emphasis shifted to an acknowledgement of the East Timorese people’s right to choose independence if they so desired. On the eve of the ballot, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer expressed Australia’s neutrality as to its outcome.

2. The East Timor intervention and Australia’s foreign relationships

The military intervention in East Timor raised troubling questions about Australia’s foreign relations on numerous fronts. The United States alliance, bilateral relations with Indonesia and Australia’s general standing in Asia were all seen by many commentators at the time to have been thrown into disarray. In hindsight, however, none of these problems were as serious or as long-lasting as they first seemed, and there were some gains made by Australia.

The Australia-United States alliance

As the first major international military action led by Australia, the East Timor deployment was a major test of the alliance with the United States. In Chapter One, it was argued that the alliance does not hamper Australia’s pursuit of the ‘national interest’. Rather, it enhances Australia’s capacity to defend its own imperialist interests within the immediate region, because the United States’ support supplements Australia’s military and diplomatic power. Nor is the alliance a security guarantee for Australia, born of the United States’ gratitude for past services. It is a statement of ongoing mutual interests. Seen as such, the relationship ultimately served both parties well in 1999. Indeed, Australia’s strategy for managing East Timor’s political transition may not have succeeded without the intervention of the United States at the key diplomatic juncture.

This was not how the United States’ position was seen by much of the Australian public at the time, as noted in Chapter Four. Public approval of the alliance stems in
part from a perception that support for Washington’s global military actions since World War Two will be reciprocated if Australia ever faces its own military threat. Commentators in Australia were not slow to suggest that the United States therefore had a debt to repay in East Timor, which they were not meeting because they were not putting ‘boots on the ground’. This was politically embarrassing for Howard, given his public avowals of the strength and importance of the bilateral relationship, and he initially seemed to share the public’s disquiet. But he should not have been taken by surprise.

Whatever the public perception, the alliance has never been a guarantee that the United States would automatically contribute forces to any Australian military operation. This has long been acknowledged in Australia’s policy of defence self-reliance. Indeed, the United States’ attitude to East Timor in 1999 was in some regards similar to its stance during the konfrontasi crisis of the 1960s, when Washington resisted direct military involvement unless Indonesia openly attacked Australian forces. This position disappointed the Menzies government, but it did at least impose limits on Indonesia’s military actions, which meant Australia and Britain had the capability to deal with the threat themselves.

Likewise in 1999, while the absence of a major United States military commitment was seen as important by the Australian public, its practical impact was not great. It is true that the United States did not respond to the emerging crisis in East Timor as rapidly as the Australian government would have liked, with full backing for a military intervention only coming after several days of negotiations. In part this was due to a dispute between the United States Department of Defence, which was reluctant to commit forces, and the State Department, which argued that Australia needed to be supported as a valued ally. But the delay also stemmed from Australia’s earlier downplaying of the need to prepare for a post-ballot intervention, due to concerns over the relationship with Indonesia.

---

21 For a recent discussion of this link, and how it was affected by the East Timor crisis, see Ian McAllister, ‘Attitude matters: Public opinion in Australia towards defence and security,’ Australian Strategic Policy Institute, August, 2004, pp. 27-32.
However, the United States did eventually provide vital support for Australia’s intervention in East Timor. This included practical assistance in areas such as transportation, communications and intelligence, in which Australia lacked capability. This involvement, as well as the stationing of United States naval assets off the coast of Timor, was also a powerful signal to Indonesia not to attempt any serious opposition to Australian forces. But by far the most valuable contribution was Washington’s diplomatic backing. Australian forces, with support from Britain and New Zealand, were more than capable of meeting the challenge of restoring order in East Timor once Indonesia agreed to their deployment. But this agreement might not have been forthcoming without pressure from United States, including threats to withhold vital financial aid.

If sections of the Clinton administration thought that Australia should be supported in East Timor because of the importance of the alliance, the deployment in turn reinforced one of its benefits to the United States. Although the world’s only ‘hyper-power’, Washington simply does not have the resources to intervene in every conflict around the world. It looks to Australia to play a policing role in the Southwest Pacific, as well as providing expertise and intelligence on Indonesia. As United States Secretary of State Colin Powell explained in 2001,

> the United States can’t do it all alone. We need our allies to help us with the security challenges of the new century. Looking to the South Pacific, we know that Australia… has a keen interest in what is happening in the region, particularly in Indonesia.

The East Timor crisis was therefore as much an opportunity for Australia to prove its current strategic worth as it was a challenge which required the calling in of previously earned favors. Australia’s intervention in East Timor accorded with Washington’s own efforts to manage Indonesia’s transition to a liberal-democratic regime, with minimal geopolitical disruption. As The Washington Post argued,

> Leadership of the peacekeepers [in East Timor] is falling to Australia, which has its own high-level interests in stabilizing that Pacific quarter... That Australia has been a loyal and useful American ally… played a part in

---

determining the Clinton administration to join the Timor peacekeeping team, and should have. Cooperation with and deference to local allies ought to be a standard part of American policy in dealing with regional crises.\(^{25}\)

Likewise, in July 2000 the United States Secretary of Defence, William Cohen, thanked Australia for having ‘taken the lead’ on issues of regional security, including East Timor.\(^{26}\)

At the same time, given that developments in the Southwest Pacific are a relatively low priority for the United States, it would be dangerous for Australia to rely completely on Washington to protect what for Australia are vital strategic concerns. Hugh White, Deputy Secretary of Defence at the time, has said that Australia requested small numbers of United States’ ground forces for symbolic reasons. Large numbers of infantry, however, were not considered desirable, because

we thought their style of doing business would be inconsistent with our way.

We wanted to run the operation, so not only did we not need them, we didn’t want them.\(^{27}\)

Operationally, United States forces were not needed, and their involvement might have complicated Australia’s pursuit of its own priorities in East Timor.

Strategically, if Australia was not able to play the leading role in restoring stability in Timor, then its standing as a regional power, and hence its value as an ally, would have come under serious question.

Overall, the East Timor episode provides a good example of the US-Australia alliance as being of mutual benefit, but not one in which Australia subordinates its independent interests. Throughout the period 1997-1999, Australian and US priorities were not totally aligned. As discussed in Chapter Three, the US, acting in tandem with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), saw Indonesia’s financial crisis as an opportunity to impose rapid and thoroughgoing neo-liberal economic reforms

---


on Jakarta, despite the destabilising political effect of these efforts. In this, the US was driven by its substantial economic interest in forcing Indonesia to accept greater openness to investment and financial dealings. For Australia, in contrast, the issue of political unrest loomed far larger, because of the immense strategic importance of Indonesia, and because of Australia’s comparatively minor economic stake in the country. Accordingly, Canberra pushed for a more lenient line to be taken on economic reforms, although it is unclear with what success.

The alliance partners were also initially out of step in September 1999 over the East Timor intervention. Australia’s military deployment certainly served the US’s long term interests in regional stability. But East Timor, tiny and a long way from areas of current vital strategic importance to the US, was not seen as a priority by at least some sections of the US state. As such, Australia was at first met with ambivalence in requests for help in dealing with the situation.

In comparison, East Timor’s independence was of far more direct interest to Australia as a regional power. Instability in the territory posed an immediate strategic problem for Canberra, which could not be ignored. This problem would have to have been addressed whether or not assistance from the United States was forthcoming. Without help from its superpower ally, however, Australia would have found the task much more difficult.

Australia was not in any way following US dictates over East Timor. As the alliance partner with most invested in the issue, and with the capacity and motivation to act quickly, Australia provided leadership on the issue. But ultimately the US responded to Australia’s lead, and in doing so provided important practical assistance. This was in contrast to the situation in 1975, when the US and Australia were from the beginning in agreement in their support for the Indonesian invasion, and when any Australian attempts to modify Washington’s approach would not likely have succeed in any case.

Relations with Indonesia

The East Timorese independence process inevitably had a negative impact on Australian-Indonesian relations, despite the Howard government’s strenuous efforts
to the contrary.\textsuperscript{28} And yet, just a few years after the intervention, bilateral relations were largely repaired, despite the lack of the strong personal relationships enjoyed during the Keating-Evans era.

Initially, the intervention was seen by many Australian commentators as the doomsday scenario of Australian-Indonesian relations, with the countries engaged in military confrontation for the first time in over three decades. Some of these commentators remained trapped in the discourse of Cold War support for Suharto, seemingly unwilling to acknowledge that the profound changes in Indonesian politics might require a readjustment of Australia’s foreign policy.\textsuperscript{29} Others were not quite so inflexible, but still argued that the relationship would need to be rebuilt almost from scratch. Paul Kelly, for example, wrote that

\begin{quote}
The reality is that as Indonesia democratises, Australia’s relations with Jakarta are the worst for decades. The Timor legacy has left a deep psychological divide between Australia and Indonesia. That it will last for a long time should not be doubted.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

Sheridan complained that the East Timor deployment had caused Australian diplomacy to go ‘totally off the rails’.\textsuperscript{31} Not surprisingly, the Australian government tried to make the best of the situation, arguing that the removal of the East Timor issue should be of long term benefit for the relationship. In October, Downer argued that

\begin{quote}
Indonesia’s democratic transition and East Timor’s separation from Indonesia… [offer] Australia new opportunities to help establish a strong, realistic and more sustainable relationship with our largest neighbour: a relationship based on mutual respect.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{28} For some non-hysterical accounts, see Peter Chalk, ‘Australia and Indonesia: Rebuilding relations after East Timor,’ \textit{Contemporary Southeast Asia} 23, no. 2 (2001), pp. 237-242; Cotton, \textit{East Timor, Australia and Regional Order}, pp. 139-144.
\textsuperscript{31} Greg Sheridan, ‘Now it’s getting personal,’ \textit{The Australian}, 4 December 1999, p. 4.
More surprisingly, Indonesia was eventually willing to accept such an approach, although this seemed unlikely at first. In the short-term, despite Australia’s best efforts, there was inevitably considerable damage done to the relationship with Indonesia. Domestic political considerations alone required that the Indonesian government display some sort of negative reaction. Australia’s actions were obviously very unpopular among sections of the Indonesian public. There were demonstrations against the intervention, including violent attacks on Australian diplomatic missions and, in November 2000, the Australian ambassador.\(^\text{33}\)

Among some policy makers as well there was clearly resentment over Australia’s role in East Timor’s independence. The ballot result and subsequent foreign intervention was a very public embarrassment for the Indonesian government, and especially for the military. The idea that Australia deliberately broke East Timor away from Indonesia and might support the independence of other restive provinces was widespread, including among some influential figures.\(^\text{34}\) Rhetorically, some Indonesian leaders strongly criticised Australia, as did some Indonesian newspapers.\(^\text{35}\) Although intangible and difficult to quantify, many years of Australian efforts to build up trust and contacts at an institutional and personal level suffered a setback. This is particularly so given that Australia had previously been a strong supporter of the Indonesian occupation, lending weight to Indonesian views that the Howard government’s declarations of ongoing support for Indonesia’s territorial integrity could not be trusted.


In practical terms the most important reaction was the cancelling of the Agreement on Maintaining Security (AMS) on September 16th. Although of minor practical significance, the treaty was of substantial symbolic importance, and its cancellation signaled that the defence relationship with Indonesia, patiently constructed over years, had suffered a definite setback. The 2000 Defence White Paper made diplomatic reference to these difficulties, noting that

Lingering misunderstandings in Indonesia about Australia’s recent role in East Timor have so far made it hard to build on the opportunities offered by Indonesia’s democratising achievements to establish the foundations of a new defence relationship.\(^\text{36}\)

The Timor Sea Treaty was now also redundant. Again, this treaty had not yet delivered actual economic benefits, but had symbolised a supposed new era of practical cooperation between the two nations. In all, the concrete diplomatic achievements of the Evans-Keating era relationship with Indonesia had rapidly evaporated. The ‘ballast’ Evans had tried to build for just such an occasion was, it seemed, entirely lacking. Relations remained distinctly cool for a number of years. Incoming Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, for example, postponed a visit to Australia several times in 2000 and 2001.\(^\text{37}\)

Nonetheless, even the medium term impact on the bilateral relationship was not ultimately as severe as might have been expected. As discussed in Chapter Three, Indonesian public opinion was offended, but the issue was relatively unimportant given the ongoing domestic political turmoil. With the People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR) convening in October and electing a new president, the issue of East Timor declined in importance. The MPR ratified the result of the referendum ballot without dissent. In part, this was because Australia had already pressured presidential candidate Megawati Sukarnoputri, who earlier during campaigning had spoken against the ‘loss’ of East Timor, into agreeing to accept the result of the independence ballot.\(^\text{38}\) The public protests against Australia may well have been

\(^{36}\) Defence 2000: Our future defence force, Department of Defence, 2000, p. 42.
backed by individuals within the defence or intelligence establishments, but they did not receive widespread government support, and they quickly dwindled in size.

Whatever their personal inclinations, leading figures in Indonesia generally adopted a pragmatic approach in dealing with the reality of independent East Timor, as well as in rebuilding relations with Australia. Prime Minister Howard was unexpectedly invited to visit new Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri immediately after she took office in August 2001, and again in February 2002.\textsuperscript{39} The election of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in September 2004, saw a further warming of relations.\textsuperscript{40} He and Howard signed a ‘Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Partnership’ in April 2005.\textsuperscript{41} The agreement was little more than a collection of high-minded aspirations, but it indicated a mutual desire to end any lingering post-Timor tension in the relationship. More substantial was the new ‘framework for security cooperation’, signed in November 2006, the terms of which were far more wide ranging than the AMS.\textsuperscript{42}

Crucially, the Indonesian military leadership resigned itself to the loss of East Timor. Reference has already been made to the efforts of the Australian military to avoid any clashes which would further inflame the diplomatic situation. It should be stressed, however, that this approach relied on the cooperation of their Indonesian counterparts, who made no serious attempt to challenge Australia’s deployment. Eventually, Indonesia also moved to curb the activities of the militias it controlled in West Timor. Remnants of the militias have continued to conduct illegal activities ranging across the East Timor-Indonesia border, supported by elements of the Indonesian security forces. But these activities, while potentially destabilising, appear to be motivated more by personal financial gain rather than strategic plots.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{39} Cotton, \textit{East Timor, Australia and Regional Order}, p. 140.
\textsuperscript{40} Michael Richardson, \textit{Australia-Southeast Asia relations and the East Asian Summit}, vol. 59, \textit{Australian Journal of International Affairs} 2005, p. 355.
\textsuperscript{41} For the text, see \textit{Joint declaration on comprehensive partnership between Australia and the Republic of Indonesia}, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 04.04.2005 (accessed 06.05.2008, \url{http://www.dfat.gov.au/GEO/indonesia/comprehensive_partnership_1105.html}).
\textsuperscript{42} Known as the ‘Lombok agreement’ after the location of its original signing, the treaty only came into force in February 2008. For the text, see \textit{Agreement between Australia and the Republic of Indonesia on the framework for security cooperation}, Australasian Legal Information Institute, 13.11.2006 (accessed 06.05.2008, \url{http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/2008/3.html}).
\textsuperscript{43} Kingsbury notes that as late as 2005 some Indonesian officers still harbored desires to retake East Timor. But the scale and nature of the militia activities cannot be considered a serious threat to East Timor’s independent existence. See Damien Kingsbury, ‘East Timor border security,’ in \textit{Violence in...
An unstable East Timor remained contrary to Indonesia’s strategic interests, no less in 1999 than at the time of the 1975 invasion. Unable to retain the territory themselves, Indonesia’s security concerns were partly addressed by Australia’s prevention of a power vacuum, no matter how personally galling this may have been.\textsuperscript{44} A pragmatic attitude towards Australia’s involvement in Timor is revealed, for example, in a publication produced by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), an Indonesian think-tank heavily involved with the original Indonesian invasion of East Timor. In their introduction, Soesastro and Subianto acknowledge Indonesia’s failure to maintain peace in East Timor, and welcome the ongoing international involvement in the new state.\textsuperscript{45} Sukma warns against East Timor becoming an Australian dependency, but is generally positive about trilateral relations, arguing that
\begin{quote}
  it is important for East Timor to evolve into a truly independent state in its own right. And, that would require a good and workable relationship with Indonesia.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

On the flip-side of the relationship, Indonesia’s importance in Australia’s overall strategic outlook was not at all diminished by the events in East Timor. Whatever its popularity in Indonesia, the idea that Australia wanted to see the breakup of its northern neighbour could not have been further from the truth. In fact, the ‘Balkanisation’ of Indonesia was the worst case scenario for Australian defence planners. Australia quickly ruled out support for independence in any of the other ‘restive provinces’, especially Aceh or West Papua.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{44} Something tacitly admitted by at least some Indonesian officers. See Damien Kingsbury, ‘Jakarta rift not terminal,’ \textit{The Australian}, 21 July 2000, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{45} At the time, Soesastro was Executive Director at the CSIS. Hadi Soesastro and Landry Haryo Subianto, ‘Introduction,’ in \textit{Peace building and state building in East Timor}, ed. Hadi Soesastro and Landry Haryo Subianto, Jakarta, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2002, pp. 3, 11.


On the contrary, in the following years Australia resolutely supported Indonesia’s sovereignty in these areas, despite growing evidence of popular support for independence or autonomy from Jakarta, and of human rights abuses by Indonesian security forces. Some officers responsible for the destruction of East Timor were posted to Aceh and West Papua, where they employed similar tactics to intimidate independence supporters. But neither the events of 1999 nor these ongoing abuses led the Howard government to seriously question Australian defence cooperation with Indonesia. Rather, they were treated only as a matter of inconvenience from the point of view of Australian domestic opinion. Moves to restore the defence relationship were initiated by the Indonesian military, and began in earnest in March 2002, when Defence Minister Hill visited Jakarta, and announced Australia would resume training Indonesian officers. Australia also lobbied the United States to restore full military links, which they did in 2005.

As well as these ongoing, mutual strategic interests, two traumatic events in the years following East Timor’s independence ballot aided the reconstruction of the bilateral relationship, by presenting opportunities for leaders from both countries to publicly smooth over lingering tensions. First, the terrorist bombing in Bali on October 12th 2002, which killed 202 people including dozens of Indonesian and Australian citizens, allowed the two countries to stress their common security interests. Australia-Indonesia police and intelligence relations were revitalised by the ensuing operations to track down those responsible, building on a memorandum of understanding on combating terrorism, which had been signed the preceding February. The context of the ‘war on terror’ and loss of Australian lives forestalled any public opposition in Australia to cooperating with those responsible for the (far more deadly) destruction in East Timor.

---

49 Don Greenlees, ‘Jakarta forces seek pact with Canberra,’ The Australian, 4 September 2001, p. 9; Lindsay Murdoch, ‘Move to renew military ties,’ The Age, 8 March 2002, p. 8.
51 See Cotton, East Timor, Australia and Regional Order, pp. 141-144.
Second, the humanitarian crisis in Aceh following a tsunami on 26th December 2004, which killed over 200,000 people in that province alone, allowed Australia to play the role of generous friend to Indonesia. The Howard government pledged A$1 billion in new aid commitments to Indonesia in response to the tsunami, although much of this money was spent on activities which had little to do with reconstruction in Aceh. Indonesia also allowed Australian military forces to assist in the emergency relief effort, and nine Australian personnel were killed in a helicopter crash in April. The contrast between the symbolism of mutual loss of life in Bali and Aceh, and the image of Australian and Indonesian troops facing off in East Timor, could hardly have been more stark.

*Australia’s place in Asia*

When the Howard government came to power, it was widely perceived as being unable and unwilling to ‘engage with Asia’ as successfully as its predecessor, as discussed in Chapter One. At first glance, the Timor deployment would seem to confirm that impression. Although several Asian countries contributed troops to the deployment, at the request of both Australia and Indonesia, there was also disquiet in the region about Australia’s actions. In particular, the troop deployment breached the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) norm of non-intervention in its members’ domestic political affairs. There was further negative reaction to the so-called ‘Howard doctrine’ which portrayed Australia as a regional military power. Most notably, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad claimed that Australia was actually to blame for violence in East Timor, and complained about its ‘heavy-
handed dealing with the problem’. While not a member of ASEAN, Australia had sought membership and other ties with the grouping for a number of years, without success. For many Australian commentators on the political Right, it was precisely actions such as the intervention in East Timor that meant Australia was treated as an ‘outsider’ in the region, and Howard’s evident hubris over the intervention would only make matters worse.

These initial negative reactions notwithstanding, the East Timor intervention actually boosted Australia’s long-term standing in Asia. Along with Australia’s response to the Asian economic crisis, East Timor allowed Howard and Downer to recast their previously clumsy, and much derided, approach to foreign policy. As discussed in greater detail below, they tried to end once and for all the debate about whether Australia really ‘belonged’ in Asia. They argued that it was Australia’s distinctive (Western) economic practices and political values that had allowed Australia to successfully take on the mantle of regional leadership in East Timor. In particular, while the deployment had breached ASEAN norms of non-interference, the regional body’s inability to resolve the crisis on its own actually seemed to validate the Howard government’s earlier criticisms of the limits to regionalism.

Much of the government’s rhetoric of success was, of course, intended for domestic consumption. Nonetheless, the East Timor deployment did reinforce Australia’s standing as a major regional power. Ryan, in a paper published by the Australian military’s official think-tank, argues that

The fact that Australia took the initiative in responding to events in East Timor enhanced its credibility in the region and beyond… the success of INTERFET has consolidated international perceptions of the ADF as a force that is capable of contributing to shaping the regional security environment.

---

60 For just a few examples of this negative domestic reaction, see Rawdon Dalrymple, ‘Guardianship of values should be a joint enterprise,’ The Australian Financial Review, 21 September 1999, p. 21; Paul Keating, ‘PM spurred by opportunism, not rights,’ The Australian, 4 October 1999, p. 15; Paul Kelly, ‘Jingoism is a luxury we cannot afford,’ The Australian, 29 September 1999, p. 17; Love, Straw polls, paper money, pp. 163-165; Greg Sheridan, ‘A fading blip on region’s radar,’ The Australian, 7 March 2000, p. 8.
61 On ASEAN’s inability to respond to take the lead on East Timor, see Dupont, ‘ASEAN’s response to the East Timor crisis,’ pp. 163-168; Dupont, ‘East Timor’s future: Penury or prosperity,’ pp. 88-89.
62 The domestic political results of the Timor deployment, as well as the wider significance of the ‘Howard doctrine’ are discussed below.
63 Ryan, ‘Primary responsibilities and primary risks,’ p. x.
This presents a rather sanguine view of how regional states perceive Australia’s power. But its success in East Timor did provide a solid basis for a newfound confidence within the Howard government in international affairs. It now proceeded to fulfill its previously announced agenda of shifting the focus of Australia’s foreign policy to strong bilateral relations, away from the Hawke-Keating emphasis on multilateralism. In terms of practical achievements in Asia, Howard’s record compares favourably with that of Keating, despite the latter’s supposed greater rapport with the region.  

Economically, Australia sidestepped its exclusion from the ASEAN economic grouping by concluding free trade agreements with Singapore and Thailand in 2003, and by initiating negotiations with Malaysia in 2005. Of greater potential benefit in the long term, negotiations on trade agreements were begun with China in 2005 and Japan and a coalition of Persian Gulf countries in 2007, and preliminary discussions took place with India from 2005. Negotiations were also begun on an Australia-New Zealand-ASEAN free trade agreement in 2004.  

Concrete achievements in regional defence relationships in Asia were fewer than on the economic front, and soon came to be dominated by concerns over the ‘war on terror’. However, given the regional tensions over East Timor, it should be noted that existing ties with Singapore and Malaysia were not affected. Other than the new security agreement with Indonesia itself, the most significant development was the strengthening of the key defence relationship with Japan. In March 2007 a ‘Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation’ was signed, promoting joint activity in areas such as counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing, although falling short of a formal defence treaty. Cooperation in East Timor was cited as having strengthened ties, although this was of less importance than subsequent joint operations in Iraq. Ties  

---


with the Philippines were also quietly strengthened, with Australian special forces providing support for combat operations against ‘terrorist’ groups in the south of the country from 2006.  

3. Impact of the East Timor deployment on Australian domestic politics

The East Timor intervention helped trigger an upsurge of militarism in Australian society, along with a climate of more strident nationalism. Building on this base of support, the Howard government embarked on a new policy of increased military spending and a more aggressive regional defence posture. After discussing these developments, this chapter concludes with an overall assessment of how successful the 1999 intervention was from the point of view of Australian imperialism.

*Militarism and Australian nationalism*

The deployment of armed forces to East Timor served as a catalyst for an increasingly militarised Australian nationalism, in which the nation’s military power was celebrated as the embodiment of shared values and interests. This impact was enhanced by the emotional context of the intervention, its widespread popular support, and the deliberate political use made of the events by the Howard government.

As Burke argues, the themes of ‘home’ and ‘security’ were always present in Howard’s political program. He came to power promising to make Australia a ‘relaxed and comfortable place’ and to govern ‘for all of us’, in contrast to the alleged divisiveness of the Keating government. This promise of national unity and stability appealed to an electorate weary of years of upheaval resulting from neo-liberal economic ‘reforms’. Following its election, however, the Howard government extended the economic agenda of the Hawke-Keating era, including attacking trade unions, cutting Federal spending and introducing the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2000. These policies were at best polarising, and many were deeply unpopular.

---

67 It is unclear whether this included operations against the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front, or only trans-national groups. John Kerin, ‘Canberra, Manila fight terrorism,’ *The Australian Financial Review*, 11 May 2006, p. 19; Greg Sheridan, ‘Behind the scenes special forces wage war by stealth,’ *The Australian*, 14 October 2006, p. 22.


The Liberal Party actually lost the popular vote in the 1998 election, and at one point looked almost certain to lose the 2001 poll.\(^{70}\)

In the face of such opposition, there were obvious political benefits in shifting national attention to security and defence issues whenever possible.\(^{71}\) The East Timor deployment was by no means an isolated instance in this regard. The September 11\(^{th}\) 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States ensured that the ‘war on terror’ was a dominant political issue for the remainder of Howard’s time in office. Later that year, the unregulated arrival of refugees in Australia, and in particular military operations against the MV Tampa, became the defining issue of the federal election campaign. But the intervention in East Timor was the first real chance for Howard to define his leadership through a strong security stance, and to associate himself with a highly popular military action. It also laid the basis for Howard’s successful response to subsequent security developments.

As we have seen, the Howard government was widely criticised over its handling of East Timor, up until Australian forces arrived in Dili. Once the intervention was underway, however, the government was in a strong position to reap political benefits. In response to various criticisms, the government defended its actions on grounds of national self-interest.\(^{72}\) At the same time, and more important here, the

---


government presented the intervention as not simply something rational which Australia did, but as exemplifying what Australia was.

Howard had always emphasised the self-sufficiency and superiority of ‘Australian values’, as part of his critique of the Keating government. Australians, he argued, should not be concerned about whether or not they were a part of Asia, or about their nation’s historical record, because Australia had its own unique and essentially positive nature. The 1997 foreign policy White Paper, for example, argued that ‘Australia does not need to choose between its history and its geography’ and that ‘National interests cannot be pursued without regard to the values of the Australian community…’

Along with Australia’s resilience in the face of the Asian economic crisis, East Timor was the chance to prove this point. Shortly after the intervention began, Howard told parliament

that in occupying what I have called a unique intersection – a Western nation next to Asia with strong links to the United States and Europe – Australia deploys unique assets in our relationship with the Asian region... We have stopped worrying about whether we are Asian, in Asia, enmeshed in Asia or part of the a [sic] mythical East-Asian hemisphere. We have got on with the job of being ourselves in the region.

Moreover, the government presented East Timor as a unifying moment for the Australian nation, in which all shared in the military success and moral purpose of Australian forces. As the first troops were embarking for East Timor, Howard proclaimed:

I know that the thoughts and prayers of all Australians will be with our troops as they embark for East Timor... [they are] part of a great Australian military

---

73 In the national interest: Australia’s foreign and trade policy White Paper, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1997, p. iv.
75 He also referred to Australia’s resilience in the face of the Asian economic crisis. Extract from the current House Hansard.
tradition, which has never sought to impose the will of this country on others, but only to defend what is right.\textsuperscript{76}

As Interfet came to an end in 2000, he praised the Australian troops who went abroad not in the name of one particular point of view in Australia, but went abroad in the name of Australia representing all of us to do a duty, to pursue a mission, to protect the people and to bring peace in accordance with the great traditions for which Australia stands.\textsuperscript{77}

Downer argued in somewhat more sophisticated terms:

As a nation, Australians can take considerable pride in how we responded to the historic challenge that events in East Timor placed before us… Yet, the self-evident humanitarian nature of our actions in 1999 did not prevent unfounded… criticisms of Australia’s role and motives. Some of the more offensive observations have hinted that Australian action was essentially hegemonism cloaked in the mantle of human rights… Had Australia done nothing at all in these circumstances, it would have been a gross dereliction of our regional responsibilities and a betrayal of the fundamental values we live by as a nation.\textsuperscript{78}

Renan observed that nationalism relies on a (semi-conscious) collective forgetting of past civil conflicts.\textsuperscript{79} Howard’s nationalism relied on a selective forgetting of Australia’s foreign conflicts as well.\textsuperscript{80} That the invasion of Turkey which spawned the ANZAC tradition was precisely a case of imposing Australia’s will on others went unmentioned in his version of history. Likewise, the presentation of the 1999 intervention as embodying Australian national values performed two somewhat contradictory tasks in the reimagining of the history of Australia-East Timor relations. On the one hand, the deployment of troops was envisaged as having flown almost inevitably from fundamental Australian principles. Previous conflicts over Australian policy, not to mention the Howard government’s own role in facilitating

\textsuperscript{76} Transcript of address by John Howard at the launch of the Gallipoli 2000 campaign.
\textsuperscript{80} Not to mention his stance towards the history of the dispossession of Aboriginal societies in Australia. See Macintyre and Clark, The history wars, pp. 137-139, 157, 181; Robert Manne, ‘Introduction,’ in Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle’s fabrication of Aboriginal history, ed. Robert Manne2003, pp. 3-5.
the destruction of East Timor, could now be effaced through this expression of national unity and pride. But at the same time, there was also an implicit critique of former Australian governments’ policy on East Timor, which had supported Indonesia’s occupation. The real defender of Australian values was the Howard government itself. Any suggestion of less than pure motives for the intervention, which might also explain why earlier governments didn’t apply ‘fundamental’ Australian values, was ‘self-evidently’ incorrect.

Beyond specific political tactics employed by the government, the East Timor intervention also resulted in a revival of militarism in Australian society, adding a more strident tone to Australian nationalist sentiment. 81 Indeed, the government and broader social responses cannot be separated, each relying on and reinforcing the other. The media was the other main agent in this process. Once Australian forces were deployed in East Timor, it adopted an uncritical approach to the intervention, focusing on the performance of the troops at an operational level. 82 Any wider perspectives offered tended to echo the government’s image of soldiers fulfilling a righteous duty. 83 One popular newspaper gushed that

The arrival in East Timor of Australia’s peacekeeping troops is as much a defining moment of our national identity as Gallipoli. It was on Gallipoli’s unassailable slopes in World War I that Australia’s ethos of mateship and loyalty were forged forever in a hail of murderous bullets. Now, 84 years later, Australia faces another onerous call to duty. 84

81 Despite his ambivalent attitude to the phenomenon, Birmingham sums up these developments well. John Birmingham, ‘A time for war: Australia as military power,’ Quarterly Essay, no. 20 (2005), pp. 47-55.


83 For example, ‘Timor outlaws meet their match,’ The Adelaide Advertiser, 22 September 1999, p. 2; Max Blenkin and John Martinkus, ‘Troops stare down militias to restore peace,’ The Courier-Mail, 22 September 1999, p. 1; Don Greenlees, ‘Diggers put peace in their sights,’ The Australian, 22 September 1999, p. 1; Don Greenlees, ‘Soldiers are saviours cry East Timorese,’ The Daily Telegraph, 22 September 1999, p. 3.

Some newspapers encouraged readers to lodge messages of support for Australian troops, and published the results. There was a general assumption that the intervention was above political debate, and that all Australians identified with the soldiers being deployed.

This praise from the media served to reinforce already positive public perceptions of the military. As an institution and as a profession, the Australian military enjoys a high degree of public confidence and trust, far greater than parliament or politicians. There is some indication that the East Timor deployment further increased this confidence. The Australian Defence Forces were themselves not unaware of this public relations boost, using images of the deployment as part of a successful new recruitment drive.

The new Australian militarism was personified in Interfet’s commander, Peter Cosgrove, who was feted as the embodiment of Australian martial prowess. In 2000 Cosgrove was promoted to Chief of the Army, and two years later to Chief of the Defence Force. He was also named Australian of the Year in 2001. His popularity was even used to rehabilitate the image of the Vietnam War, as his distinguished service in that conflict was emphasised by the media. At times he was treated like a popular star, even receiving a standing ovation at a television awards ceremony, and featuring in a beer commercial. As Birmingham writes,

---

85 For example, ‘Praise a peacekeeper,’ *The Canberra Times*, 21 September 1999, p. 6; ‘Telephone messages - Your words of support for our peacekeepers,’ *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 September 1999, p. 6; ‘Your messages to troops,’ *Herald Sun*, 23 September 1999, p. 4.


87 Rachelle Burbury, ‘Defence recruiting ads hit their targets,’ *The Australian Financial Review*, 4 December 2001, p. 46. That East Timor had helped recruitment had already been noted, see Lachlan Heywood and Jacob Greber, 'Recruit hopefuls line up,’ *The Courier-Mail*, 25 September 1999, p. 6; Andrew McKenzie, ‘Forces march on new image,’ *The Australian*, 9 November 1999, p. 27.


89 I owe this point to Tom O’Lincoln

If ever there was a moment when we could say that the Vietnam Syndrome had been laid to rest, it was then, when the General was invited to mix it up on prime-time TV with a parade of vacuous silicone-enhanced soapie stars.\(^9^1\)

The prominence of military officers in public life continued with the naming of former general Michael Jeffrey as Governor-General in 2003.

The impact on Australian culture at a more popular level could be seen in the production of a number of television programs focusing on Australian security forces, such as *Border Security* (‘reality’ television series), *Patrol Boat* (drama series) *Policing the Pacific* (documentary mini-series) and *Answered by Fire* (drama mini-series, focusing on Australian police in East Timor before and after the independence ballot). The last two of these raised questions over the effectiveness of Australia’s policies. But all took for granted the vital importance and basically positive impact of Australian security forces at home and in the region. This period also saw the continued reinvigoration of Anzac Day celebrations, in particular the phenomenon of young Australians travelling in increasing numbers to mark the day at Gallipoli itself.\(^9^2\)

There was also a notable surge in the popularity of displaying the Australian flag, and its use as a mobilising symbol by the political Right.\(^9^3\) In 2004 an increase in federal funding for schools was made dependent on their displaying the Australian flag, while in 2007 a popular music festival was widely condemned for asking patrons not to bring the flag, as in previous years it had been used in instances of racial harassment. The potential for the extreme Right-wing to benefit from such developments was apparent in the Cronulla riot of December 2005, in which many participants draped themselves (literally) in the Australian flag, or displayed flag tattoos. The flag was also prominent at protests in 2007-2008 against the establishment of a Muslim school in the west of Sydney. Howard brought together the themes of flag, Gallipoli and East Timor in April 2000, when he unveiled an

---

\(^9^1\) Birmingham, ‘A time for war,’ p. 47.

\(^9^2\) A reinvigoration that seems to have begun under the Hawke and Keating governments. See Ibid., pp. 52-53; Graeme Davidson, ‘The habit of commemoration and the revival of Anzac Day,’ *Australian Cultural History* 22 (2003), pp. 78-81; Bruce Scates, ‘In Gallipoli’s shadow: Pilgrimage, memory, mourning and the Great War,’ *Australian Historical Studies* 33, no. 119 (2002), pp. 7-8.

Australian flag which would be raised and lowered at Anzac Day services in Turkey each year, like a sacred relic. He again praised the East Timor deployment as part of ‘that Anzac tradition [which] permeates our modern life as it has permeated earlier generations.’

The collapse of Left-liberal critique

The political hay-making over the East Timor intervention was aided by the uncritical support it received from commentators more often given to criticising the Howard government. The strong popular backing for the intervention was noted in Chapter Four. To this must be added support from across the spectrum of mainstream politics, as symbolised by the three parliamentary party leaders travelling together to Townsville and Darwin to farewell Australian troops. The popular support actually increased once the intervention was underway. But the intervention was also strongly backed by a range of more Left-wing and small-l liberal commentators and academics. On the other hand, criticisms of the intervention were more likely to come from elements of Right-wing opinion fearful of the impact on the relationship with Indonesia, as noted above. East Timor thus saw an odd reversal from the general trend of public comment on the Howard government, particularly on security matters.

A number of commentators generally known for their critiques of the Howard government praised the East Timor intervention. This included some who were critical of other aspects of Australian policy on East Timor in 1999, or security and diplomatic issues in general. Manne, for example, criticised Howard’s post-intervention militarism, as noted above. But at the same time he argued that ‘Nonetheless it would be churlish to deny that, in the end and on balance, East Timor was probably John Howard’s finest hour.’ Garran was likewise critical of Howard’s overall diplomatic record, including over East Timor, but finds the

---

94 Transcript of address by John Howard at the launch of the Gallipoli 2000 campaign.
95 That is, John Howard, Kim Beazley and Meg Lees, leader of the Democrats. Bob Brown, then the Greens’ sole senator, also supported the deployment. Peter Cole-Adams, ‘Look after your mates, Howard urges troops,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 20 September 1999, p. 14; Aban Contractor, ‘MPs join forces to support peacekeepers,’ The Canberra Times, 22 September 1999, p. 11.
96 One report put public approval of the intervention 10 days after it began at 82%. Adrian Rollins, ‘Timor stance boosts support for Coalition,’ The Age, 3 October 1999, p. 4.
97 Manne, ‘The Howard years: A political Interpretation,’ p. 46.
intervention itself to be a ‘singular achievement’. 98 An outspoken critic of the Howard government’s refugee policies, Maley believed that in East Timor the government’s goals were ‘commendable and honourable’, although they also committed a number of diplomatic mistakes. 99 Kent described the Howard government’s record on human rights and international diplomacy as ‘fraught with contradiction’, between a poor general record, but a position on East Timor which ‘placed it on a higher moral plane than its predecessors.’ 100 All these positions present the 1999 military deployment as strangely apolitical, as if it was somehow separable from the preceding diplomatic and policy maneuvering of the Howard government, and from the intervention’s subsequent political and cultural impact.

Once committed to supporting the intervention, Left-wing figures were not immune to the growing Australian militarism. Shortly after the intervention began, Howard raised the possibility of a return to conscription, although the idea was quickly rejected by the Army. 101 But it was supported by Tim Costello, a leading Baptist known for his advocacy of social justice, who noted that ‘If conscription is necessary, it is now socially and politically acceptable.’ 102 A demand for increased military might was also made by Left-wing commentator Phillip Adams, who argued:

It is time to recognise that in the next century our region will be unstable and that a nation of 20 million people, predominantly white and preposterously wealthy, needs to have first-class armed services. 103

---

102 Cited in Richard Baker, ‘National service gains support,’ The Age, 25 September 1999, p. 22. Bill Hayden, former Governor-General and Minister for Foreign Affairs in the Hawke government, was also supportive. Bill Hayden, ‘Don’t forget we’re on our own,’ The Australian, 14 September 1999, p. 15.
103 Phillip Adams, ‘Day of the lap-dog is over,’ The Australian, 25 September 1999.
Reminiscent of the fear that the Yellow Hordes inevitably covet Australia’s riches, Adams’ argument demonstrated the ability of a Left-nationalist position to slip into support for militarism and xenophobia.  

As noted in Chapter Two, the critique of Australian ‘appeasement’ of Indonesia has also tended to lead to nationalist conclusions. A number of scholars who have criticised Australian policy in this vein, including Howard’s own stance on East Timor, supported the eventual intervention. While not their intention, this lack of critique only helped Howard’s political appropriation of events in East Timor. Kingsbury adopted rhetoric similar to the government’s when he characterised the intervention as a ‘proper, disciplined and genuinely neutral’ force, which quickly dealt with the ‘gutless thugs’ of the Indonesian backed militias.  

Burchill has even implied that Australia should have confronted Indonesia militarily, arguing that

The moral responsibility for the atrocities committed in East Timor after the ballot… must be shared by those states that waited for Jakarta’s permission before sending in an armed peacekeeping force on 20 September.

He also defended Howard’s reshaping of Australia’s diplomacy in Asia according to what Burchill describes as ‘popular’, as opposed to ‘elite’, attitudes.

Perhaps most surprising is the support of Burke, coming as it does in a work which fundamentally critiques Australia’s security apparatus. Burke argues that

Howard’s obsession with ‘Security, certainty, and home’ led to the destruction of East Timor in 1999, as Australia tried to maintain its previous relationship with Indonesia. He himself called for ‘an extended UN peacekeeping presence’ in May 1999, and demanded that ‘Australia now needs to get tough.’ But the East Timorese resistance movement could also be said to have fought for the demands of ‘security’ and ‘home’. Australia also aimed to restore its own ‘security’ and ‘certainty’ with its military intervention. This is perhaps why Howard found it so

For another example, see Bruce Haigh, Pillars of fear, Sydney, Otford Press, 2001, pp. 1-2, 53-56.

Damien Kingsbury, ‘Conclusion,’ in Guns and ballot boxes: East Timor’s vote for independence, ed. Damien Kingsbury, Victoria, Monash Asia Institute, 2000, p. 185.


Burke, In fear of security, pp. 212-220.

Ibid., p. 212.

Anthony Burke, ‘Timor process deeply flawed,’ The Canberra Times, 4 May 1999, p. 9. Burke later wrote that he called for an ‘armed force’ at that time, but the need for an armed UN presence is not made explicit in the original article. See Burke, In fear of security, p. 216.
easy to incorporate East Timor into an historical narrative celebrating Australia’s military power. Burke criticises Howard’s post-intervention militarism, saying

Of course Interfet marched for what was right, but we could not say this so certainly of the troops who went to Vietnam and Malaya, to South Africa and the Sudan, or even of the thousands who were sacrificed on the alter of 
European Realpolitik during the Great War.111

Yet exactly how the East Timor deployment differed from other episodes in Australia’s security policy is not explained. Presumably, like Downer, Burke takes this to be self-evident. His recourse to a standard liberal view that Australia’s military power can be unproblematically deployed in specific instances, as long as they ‘march for right’, reveals the limit of his critique, which is not grounded in a wider examination of Australia’s imperialist interests.

The Howard doctrine: Australia as regional military power

On September 28th, just days after Australian forces landed in East Timor, The Bulletin magazine ran an article based on an interview with John Howard. It announced a watershed in Australian defence and foreign policy:

The Howard Doctrine - the PM himself embraces the term – sees Australia acting in a sort of ‘deputy’ peacekeeping capacity in our region to the global policeman role of the US. East Timor shows Australia as a medium-sized economically strong, regional power…112

Howard again used the interview to boast of the success brought by Australia’s distinct national identity. He also said that Cabinet had agreed to an increase in defence spending, because of increasing regional instability. In popular discussion, Howard was soon being quoted as describing Australia as the United States’ ‘deputy sheriff’. The article brought widespread criticism, and Howard eventually claimed not to have used the actual word ‘deputy’, although it remained unclear exactly which other parts of the purported doctrine he did or did not embrace.113

111 It is interesting that he does not include World War Two in this list. Burke, In fear of security, p. 219.
Precise wording aside, the article accurately reflected the overall development of Howard’s thinking on regional security, and its substance became policy. In particular, the idea that Australian armed forces must play a more overt role as the region’s policeman became firmly entrenched, shifting the emphasis of defence policy away from the previous focus on continental security.

The new policy found its first official expression in the 2000 Defence White Paper. At one level, the White Paper did not depart from conventional thinking on the importance of regional stability.\(^\text{114}\) Going back as far as the 1987 coup in Fiji, the Hawke government considered the need for Australian military intervention in regional trouble spots.\(^\text{115}\) The 1997 *Australia’s strategic policy* stated that

> …Australia’s most direct strategic interests continue to include the stability, safety and friendly disposition of the countries closest to us - the inner arc of islands from Indonesia in the west through to Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and the Southwest Pacific.\(^\text{116}\)

This paper also made the first attack on the Hawke-Keating governments’ focus on continental defence, arguing that Australia had strategic interests throughout the Asia-Pacific, and mooting the need for long range strike capabilities.\(^\text{117}\)

There were two important developments, however, between the 1997 and 2000 policy statements. First, a deterioration in the regional security climate was no longer a vague possibility against which Australia should have a general level of preparation. Epitomised by East Timor, the ‘arc of insecurity’ was now allegedly a tangible and identifiable threat, which demanded some sort of response on Australia’s part. The 2000 White Paper argued that

\(^{28}\) September 1999, p. 15; Kelly, ‘Jingoism is a luxury we cannot afford.’; Brendan Nicholson, ‘Howard scotches talk of Canberra’s policing role,’ *The Age*, 28 September 1999, p. 11.

\(^{114}\) On these continuities throughout the 1990s and earlier, see Ayson, ‘The ‘arc of instability’ and Australia’s strategic policy,’ pp. 222-223.


\(^{116}\) *Australia’s strategic policy*, Department of Defence, 1997, p. 10. See also *In the national interest: Australia’s foreign and trade policy White Paper*, pp. 1, 37.

Countries in our immediate neighbourhood – Indonesia, East Timor, Papua New Guinea, and the island states of the Southwest Pacific – face large economic and structural challenges.118

In particular, the very existence of Pacific island countries was in question:

The stability, cohesion and viability of some of these nations will remain under significant pressure over the years ahead. Their resulting vulnerability will continue to be a strategic concern for Australia.119

Second, the success of the East Timor deployment provided the model for a much more proactive Australian response to this problem. Australia’s diplomatic, economic and most importantly military strength allowed it to intervene in the region to remove sources of instability. One of Australia’s key strategic goals would be to foster the security of our immediate neighbourhood. We would be concerned about internal challenges to the stability and cohesion of neighbouring countries and concerned about any threat of external aggression against them.120

Military intervention would be central to this project. Citing the East Timor deployment among other examples, the White Paper predicted an increase in Australia’s involvement in ‘military operations other than war’, such as peacekeeping. Australia needed to be able to play the largest role in any international coalitions conducting these operations in the region, and to be able to conduct several such operations at once. Moreover, the line between peacekeeping duties and more conventional confrontations with regional competitors could easily become blurred.121 Ultimately, military capability in both types of operations would be needed to secure Australia’s position as the key power-broker in the Southwest Pacific.122 The impact of the East Timor deployment on Australia’s policy in the Pacific is discussed more fully in Chapter Seven.

What should be noted here is that Australian strategic planners perceived a lack of military capability to back up such ambitious plans. The army had performed well in East Timor, but the deployment also revealed weaknesses in the structure of

119 Ibid., p. 23.
120 Ibid., p. x.
121 Ibid., pp. 10-12, 47-51.
122 See Ibid., pp. 43-44.
Australia’s forces. Between the end of the Cold War and 1999, the size of the defence forces had decreased by 30%. Meanwhile, spending had been focused on high end technology aimed to defend the air-sea gap to Australia’s north. This meant that there were relatively few ground forces available for low-intensity but extended operations, such as that in East Timor. Moreover, in 1999 Australia had struggled logistically in deploying its forces. Oblique references were made to these problems in the 2000 Defence White Paper. The ‘obvious’ need to increase defence spending was backed by a range of commentators, and in fact had been floated by the government as early as March 1999.

The government accordingly increased the defence budget over the following years, which was designed to give Australia enhanced ability to project force within Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific. Spending on defence rose (in real terms) from A$13.5 billion in 1997-1998 to A$19.6 billion in 2006-2007, enough to halt a long term secular decline in spending as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Much of the spending was focused on increasing Australia’s ability to deploy infantry to maintain order in the ‘arc of instability’. This included increasing the number of frontline soldiers, and raising the readiness of some units to enable more rapid deployment. To move these soldiers around the region, the government invested in new transport helicopters, larger troop transport ships and larger transport

---

123 Peter Chalk, *Australian foreign and defence policy in the wake of the 1999/2000 East Timor intervention*, Santa Monica, RAND, 2001, pp. 61-62. White indicates that the government moved to raise more infantry forces almost as soon as the decision to intervene in East Timor was made; White, ‘The road to INTERFET,’ p. 84.


127 An overview of the required capability was given in *Defence 2000: Our future defence force*, pp. 49-50, 80-92. One acquisition ruled out in the White Paper which did eventually go ahead was the purchase of 59 Abrams heavy tanks from the United States in 2004. This seemed due to Howard’s emphasis on operational compatibility with United States’ forces in the ‘war on terror’, rather than any conceivable use in regional operations.

aircraft, or committed to their future acquisition. But as well, Australia invested in high end weapons platforms designed to maintain a technological edge over the conventional forces of its regional rivals. This included the purchase or planned purchase of attack helicopters, ‘air warfare’ destroyers, heavy tanks, state of the art fighter-attack aircraft and new mid-air refueling aircraft.\textsuperscript{129}

The popularity of the East Timor deployment made an increase on military spending palatable among the electorate. One poll reported 57\% approval for a new ‘East Timor levy’ imposed by the government to fund the intervention itself, in contrast to a majority who opposed the introduction of the GST at the same time.\textsuperscript{130} Even before the intervention began, an editorial in \emph{The Australian Financial Review} realised the potential:

\begin{quote}
The calls for action in Timor are ironic because many of those who fostered the political climate in which the army was run down were the loudest in demanding Australia intervene there. This call to arms has, for the first time in decades, given broad legitimacy to the proposition that Australia should be able to intervene militarily outside its territory. This raises the possibility of building a domestic consensus, not just in favour of increased defence spending, but of changing the structure of the defence force.\textsuperscript{131}
\end{quote}

\textit{A success story for Australian imperialism}

Various positions as to whether or not the Australian intervention in East Timor should be considered a success have already been considered. But from the perspective of this thesis, the salient issue is that, in the short term at least, the intervention was an overwhelming success from the point of view of Australian imperialism.

First, the immediate problem of the transition to independence in East Timor was managed so as to preserve Australia’s underlying strategic interests. As a new nation,

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{129} Overviews of purchases completed or committed to by the Howard government after the East Timor deployment can be found in Andrew Davies, ‘ADF capability review: Royal Australian Air Force,’ \textit{Policy Analysis} no. 26, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2008; Andrew Davies, ‘ADF capability review: Royal Australian Navy,’ \textit{Policy Analysis} no. 23, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2008; Mark Thomson and Andrew Davies, ‘ADF capability review: Australian Army,’ \textit{Policy Analysis} no. 25, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2008
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{130} Tony Wright, ‘Voters back Timor tax,’ \textit{The Age}, 7 December 1999, p. 1. The levy consisted of an additional 0.5-1.0\% income tax on people earning over A$50,000 per year.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{131} Editorial, ‘Spending more makes sense.’ Kelly likewise described the Timor deployment as the ‘perfect justification for increased military spending’. Kelly, ‘Partnerships the cornerstone of defence.’
\end{flushleft}
East Timor was cast basically in the mould of Western liberal democracy; no ‘failed state’ or ‘Southeast Asian Cuba’ ensued. Australia also attained an economic and strategic position in East Timor which, if not completely excluding other powers, certainly placed it in prime position to defend its interests in the future.

Second, the capacity of the Australian state to pursue its ongoing imperialist objectives was enhanced. Domestically, there was a conjuncture of state, elite and popular support for the East Timor deployment in particular and Australian militarism in general. This gave the Howard government the opportunity to boost military spending, as well as to enunciate a more aggressive regional defence policy. Internationally, Australia suffered minimal sustained damage to the relationship with Indonesia, and its general position in Asia was not adversely affected. Australia’s status as a regional force under the aegis of the United States’ global power was enhanced. Overall, the Australian state could face its strategic tasks in the region with increased self-confidence and freedom of action.

These tasks, however, were now also more onerous. Australia needed to fulfill its self-assumed responsibility for maintaining stability in the Southwest Pacific. While the 1999 intervention protected Australia’s strategic interests in the short term, in the longer term economic and social problems continued to threaten East Timor’s stability. Accordingly, even as East Timor’s progress to independence was being celebrated, Australian commentators were expressing concerns that the new nation was a strategic liability requiring ongoing attention.132 Without the assistance of the Suharto regime, Australia had no choice but to assume a major, ongoing involvement in the new state. Moreover, the intervention raised expectations for Australian action in the wider region, while crystallising perceptions of threats to Australia’s interests. How Australia faced these new challenges is the subject of the final chapter.

---

Chapter Seven

Australia’s Pacific interventionism

If the success in East Timor provided a boost to Australia’s confidence in pursuing its national interests, it might be expected to have pursued a more aggressive foreign policy in the following years, especially in Asia. This certainly seemed to be the implication of the ‘Howard doctrine’, reinforced by Australia’s strong support for the United States’ led ‘war on terror’ after September 11th 2001, and Howard’s declaration that Australia was prepared to launch preemptive strikes against terrorist targets in neighbouring countries.¹

As we have seen, however, such hubristic rhetoric was soon abandoned in favour of far more pragmatic relations with Asian countries. Instead, the impact of the 1999 deployment on subsequent policy was felt in Australia’s relations with the Southwest Pacific. Australia’s strategic weight in the area gives it a greater freedom of action than in Southeast Asia, and it was here that the Howard government was able to pursue a more interventionist and militarised policy. This chapter outlines developments in Australia’s relations in the region, before considering the reasoning behind the policy shift and its connections with the East Timor deployment. Finally, Australia’s redeployment of troops to East Timor in 2006 is examined.


Following the East Timor deployment, the Howard government launched a series of what became known as ‘cooperative interventions’ in a number of South Pacific countries, involving military, police and civilian administrative personnel. This section summarises these interventions, by country since they frequently overlapped in time. The intention is not to provide an exhaustive discussion of every individual deployment, but to outline Australia’s overall policy.

¹ Steve Lewis, ‘Howard runs the gauntlet of Asia,’ The Australian, 2 December 2002, p. 1.
The Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands were at the centre of Australia’s new regional policy. From 1998 the country experienced major civil conflict, the roots of which were longstanding and complex, but which centred on disputed rights to land and perceived cultural differences between people indigenous to the island of Guadalcanal, and settlers from the neighbouring Malaita and their descendents. The civil conflict exacerbated severe economic problems resulting from a collapse in the price of major commodity exports following the Asian financial crisis. Ethnic, political and economic grievances became entangled, as groups of armed militants supported themselves by extracting funds from the government under the guise of ‘compensation’ for past grievances.

In April 2000, Prime Minister Ulufa’alu requested that Australia send police to maintain law and order. This request, however, was refused, the reasons for which are discussed below. In June, Malaitan militants staged a coup, installing Manasseh Sogavare as Prime Minister, whose government Australia nonetheless recognised. But as violence worsened, Australia, with support from New Zealand, initiated ceasefire discussions, eventually leading to the Townsville agreement of October 2000. A peace monitoring mission, comprising unarmed police from Australia and a number of Pacific countries, had some success in reducing violence until its end in June 2002, although the underlying tensions were not resolved.

The country’s crisis now shifted to one of general lawlessness, rather than organised civil conflict. The Kamakeza government, elected in 2001, again unsuccessfully requested that Australian police intervene. Some commentators stress that by late 2002 there were signs of greater government functionality, which had never entirely

---

6 Moore, Happy Isles in crisis, pp. 147-152.
collapsed. Nonetheless, in April 2003 Kamakeza renewed his request for Australian intervention, as the government was facing financial crisis and the police were unable to restore basic security.

A change of policy had already been contemplated in Canberra, although even in January 2003 Foreign Minister Alexander Downer described the suggestion that Australian troops should intervene as ‘folly in the extreme’. In June 2003, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) published a highly influential report, which declared that the ‘Solomon Islands, one of Australia’s nearest neighbours, is a failing state.’ ASPI recommended direct Australian intervention to take over the country’s finances and institute long term political and economic reforms, while an international police force ensured law and order. Direct Australian control of these actions would be necessary to bypass the corrupt and ineffective Solomon Islands government.

The Australian government had in fact commissioned the ASPI report, and undoubtedly endorsed its general stance before its publication. The think-tank’s then Director, Hugh White, had already been advocating a change in policy and early drafts were circulated among policy makers. Meanwhile, Downer had already commissioned a departmental review of policy on the Solomon Islands. Kamakeza’s renewed request for intervention was actually prompted by these developments.

Downer publicly endorsed the ASPI report at its launch, where he announced a new Australian policy of ‘co-operative intervention, working with and at the request of’

---


10 For a summary, see Ibid., p. 4.

the relevant government, together with partners in the region’. 12 Kamakeza had already held discussions with Howard on the possibility of an intervention, 13 and later that month it was announced that Australia would organise what became known as the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). 14 In addition to the measures advocated by ASPI, there was to be a strong initial Australian military deployment to ensure security. The intervention was endorsed by the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), with personnel contributions from a number of island nations, as well as New Zealand. Funding and control of RAMSI, however, were firmly in Australia’s hands. 15

Media attention focused on the military aspects of Australia’s intervention, not least the sight of fully armed troops making amphibious landings in Honiara on July 24th. 16 These forces quickly established basic security, and were drawn down from October. Of greater long term significance was the deployment of hundreds of Australian police and civilian personnel. The Solomon Islands police were almost completely replaced by overseas officers, around half from Australia and half from New Zealand and Pacific island nations. Australia also placed over 100 personnel in what were seen as key administrative positions, such as in the Ministry of Finance, the Attorney-General’s Department, the Ombudsman’s office and the court system. 17 They did not merely provide the ‘technical advice’ common in developing countries, but rather assumed line management positions with direct control over decision making. In short, Australia assumed responsibility for many of the functions of the Solomon Islands government. No timeframe was given for the resumption of full Solomon Islands’ sovereignty.

RAMSI was generally seen as having succeeded in ending conflict in the Solomon Islands, and came to be a model for subsequent Australian interventions in the

12 Patrick Walters and Mary-Louise O’Callaghan, ‘$850m plan to support Honiara,’ The Australian, 11 June 2003, p. 7.
15 General accounts of the intervention are given in Fullilove, ‘The testament of Solomons: RAMSI and international state-building,’ pp. 8-17; Wainwright, ‘Responding to state failure - the case of Australia and Solomon Islands,’ pp. 491-495.
16 That Australia was landing at the same site as United States forces during World War Two did not go unnoticed. Mary-Louise O’Callaghan, ‘New bootprints on beachhead of history,’ The Australian, 25 July 2003, p. 1; Craig Skehan, ‘Optimism as troops land at site of bloody battle,’ The Age, 25 July 2003, p. 1.
Pacific. However, in April 2006, following elections won by Snyder Rini, this image of success was abruptly shattered.\(^1^8\) Rini was widely regarded as having won the ballot through bribery, with Chinese businesspeople the source of largesse. After he was named Prime Minister, a crowd stoned his entourage as it left the parliament building, forcing it to retreat into the building. Seventeen Australian police officers were injured before the crowd was eventually dispersed with tear gas, but riots then broke out in the largely Chinese owned commercial district of Honiara, with dozens of businesses ransacked and razed.\(^1^9\) Australia immediately redeployed troops to Honiara, as well as extra police, who quickly restored calm and arrested two opposition Members of Parliament for allegedly provoking the riots.\(^2^0\)

Rini was nonetheless forced to resign, and was replaced by former Prime Minister Sogavare. This was an unwelcome development for Canberra. Sogavare had been one of the few politicians to initially speak against RAMSI,\(^2^1\) and an Australian official said in a leaked email before the election that he would be a ‘depressing choice’.\(^2^2\) Sogavare immediately attempted to impose some measure of control over RAMSI. For example, he initially named as police minister one of those Members of Parliament who were under arrest.\(^2^3\) He also called for Solomon Islands personnel to be returned to key administrative positions and demanded an inquiry into the role of Australian police in triggering the riots.\(^2^4\)

In retaliation, Australia sought to extradite Attorney-General Julien Moti, an Australian citizen, over child sex charges which had previously been dismissed by a Vanuatu court. This resulted in a long-running dispute, during which Australian police even raided Sogavare’s office while he was out of the country.\(^2^5\)

---

\(^{18}\) For one typically positive review of RAMSI, which appeared just before the riots, see Ibid.


\(^{21}\) Mary-Louise O’Callaghan, ‘We’ll be puppets - Pacific leader,’ *The Australian*, 10 July 2003, p. 1.

\(^{22}\) Craig Skehan, ‘Email leak upsets Honiara relations,’ *The Age*, 1 May 2006, p. 7. The email also made clear that Australian officials had tried to dissuade Solomon Islands politicians from choosing Rini as Prime Minister.


\(^{25}\) Ronald J. May, ‘State building in weak states: Some reflections of the Australian experience,’ in *The crisis in Timor-Leste: Understanding the past, imagining the future*, ed. Dennis Shoesmith,
Underlying these at times farcical maneuvers was growing unease in the Solomon Islands about RAMSI’s open-ended time frame and some of its deeper ‘nation building’ aspects, such as plans for changes to land tenure and the constitution. To this must be added the tension inherent in an intervention which ostensibly sought to support the national government, but which stripped it of many of its sovereign powers. Sogavare’s challenge to RAMSI was largely rhetorical, and he never actually sought its cancellation. However, RAMSI could no longer be seen as a neutral and universally welcomed peacemaker.

**Papua New Guinea**

Following on from RAMSI’s initial success, the Howard government turned its attention to Papua New Guinea (PNG). But in this case it was not an acute political crisis or major acts of violence which prompted Australian intervention. Instead, it was a renewed focus on longstanding Australian concerns about PNG’s lack of economic growth and general climate of insecurity.

The government’s new approach was again backed by Australian academic comment, which explained PNG’s problems in terms of a failure of governance and weak state capability. Probably most influential was a pair of reports released by the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) in mid-2003. They argued that PNG was following the Solomon Islands in becoming a failed state, and that years of Australian aid had actually been detrimental to development in PNG and the Pacific islands in general.

---


In an effort to overcome corruption, in August 2003, Cabinet agreed to demand far greater oversight over how PNG spent Australian aid money. Negotiations soon began, but the PNG parliament only finally signed off on the new aid program, called the Enhanced Cooperation Package (ECP), in July 2004. The lengthy delay in part reflected PNG’s attempts to limit the conditions attached to the continuation of Australian aid, worth over A$300 million per year. Ultimately, however, PNG was not in a position to reject conditionality outright. In particular, Howard and Downer began talking of PNG as a potential ‘failed state’. Following the Solomon Islands deployment, this signaled to reluctant PNG officials that the consequences of rejecting Australia’s new agenda could be dire.

Eventually, PNG agreed to allow several dozen senior Australian officials to assume line management positions in the public service, particularly in areas relating to governance and finance. In addition, over 200 Australian police would take up positions within the PNG police force, essentially taking control of the organisation. The measures would cost Australia an extra A$800 million over four years. Controversially, Australian police were to enjoy immunity from prosecution under PNG law, in order to give them a free hand in addressing official corruption.

But in May 2005, Australian police were suddenly forced to leave the country, when the High Court ruled that their immunity was a breach of the PNG constitution.
brought by the Governor of Morobe Province, who had previously attacked the ECP as infringing on PNG’s sovereignty. Moreover, Australia’s new interventionist strategy in the Pacific resulted in a severely strained relationship between Canberra and Port Moresby. Somare had already threatened to cancel the ECP in March 2005, because he was forced to remove his shoes in a security check at Brisbane airport. More seriously, PNG ministers were temporarily denied all access to Australia in 2006, even to transit to other destinations, after Julian Moti escaped extradition to Australia from PNG onboard a military aircraft. Somare declared Downer’s actions ‘the outburst of a minister who still thinks Papua New Guinea is a territory.’

Despite these difficulties, Australia’s designs were not entirely thwarted. Civilian officials attached to the ECP remained in the country, and at the end of 2005 a modified program was put in place, with forty Australian police working in PNG in an advisory role. An Australian was also appointed as Solicitor-General. It should also be noted that during this period, under completely separate arrangements to the ECP and with no publicity, the Australian Defence Force increased the number of its officers serving with the PNG Defence Force.

Vanuatu

In the second half of 2004, Australia used its financial power to ensure the removal of the elected Prime Minister of Vanuatu. Serge Vohor came to power in July 2004, but with a shaky parliamentary majority. He relied on the support of rural electorates, which had become dissatisfied with the Australian backed reform program of the previous Natapei government. In September, Vohor announced that two Australian Federal Police officers would be ejected from the country, along with

---

two AusAID officials working in the State Law Office. Australia responded by threatening to cut aid. The ejection of the Australian officials was then revoked, but Canberra was not placated. Moreover, Vohor initiated a bidding war between China and Taiwan for Vanuatu’s diplomatic support. Previously, Vanuatu had recognised China, but Vohor now sought Taiwanese financial aid in return for ‘joint recognition’ of both states. As discussed below, Australia disapproves of such Chinese-Taiwanese diplomatic competition in the Pacific, and believed it was destabilising Vanuatu.

In November, with a parliamentary vote of no-confidence looming, an Australian delegation visited Vanuatu, impressing on parliamentarians the need to return to a ‘good governance’ agenda, or risk losing Australian aid. China likewise pushed for Vohor’s removal. This combination of Australian and Chinese pressure was successful, and Vohor was replaced as Prime Minister in December. Downer immediately visited the country, boosting Australian aid by A$6 million per year, after the new Lini government agreed to a revamped anti-corruption package.

**Nauru**

By the late 1990s, Nauru’s former wealth based on phosphate mining had largely been squandered, while the population was heavily reliant on imports of basic necessities, including drinking water. In 2001-2002 the country began to receive Australian financial aid for the first time. Substantial conditionality, however, was attached to this aid.

---


Nauru agreed to host detention centres for asylum seekers who were intercepted trying to enter Australian waters via boat, to prevent them gaining access to the Australian legal system. Under this so-called ‘Pacific solution’, Nauru received tens of millions of dollars in financial aid over the following years, but also accepted Australian advisors regarding finance and policing.\(^{50}\) Australia itself thus exploited Nauru’s financial weakness to – in effect – purchase aspects of its sovereignty.

From 2004, Australian officials assumed direct control over the nation’s finances and policing.\(^{51}\) Australian police deployed to the island enjoyed immunity from Nauruan law, and were responsible to the Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police. The ongoing viability of Nauru as a sovereign nation was thus brought into question, as there was no indication given as to when Australian involvement in the country’s administration would end. Indeed, one option considered by Australia in late 2003 was to offer the entire Nauruan population Australian citizenship and to relocate them to Australian territory, effectively dissolving the nation.\(^{52}\)

**Tonga**

Australian military intervention in Tonga in November 2006 displayed the limits of Canberra’s support for democratic government in the region. At the time, Tonga’s monarch held the right to appoint the government, and less than one third of parliament was elected by popular vote. Demands for democratic reforms had been backed by large strikes and protests the previous year. Tensions further increased from September when King Tupou IV died, to be replaced by his much less popular son.

In mid-November, rioting broke out in the capital Nuku’alofa, after it was announced that promised reforms would be delayed.\(^{53}\) The rioting seemed to have achieved its

---

\(^{50}\) A similar arrangement was accepted by PNG, but rejected by Fiji. The arrangement lasted until 2008, and was conducted under a series of Memorandums of Understanding. On the first agreement, see *Media release: MOU on asylum seekers signed with Nauru*, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 11.12.2001 (accessed 15.08.2008, [http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/releases/foreign/2001/fa177_01.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/releases/foreign/2001/fa177_01.html)).


goals, with the government promising to hold elections in 2008 in which a majority of parliament would be elected.\textsuperscript{54} Australia and New Zealand were less impressed, quickly dispatching soldiers and police to Tonga, at the request of the government.\textsuperscript{55} They soon restored calm on the streets, but the intervention angered democracy leaders.\textsuperscript{56}

\textit{Fiji}

Against the background of greater Australian interventionism in the Pacific region, relations with Fiji were an apparent anomaly. In 2000 and again in 2006, elected Fijian governments were overthrown in coups. Australia’s response, however, was decidedly muted.

In May 2000, failed businessman George Speight took Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudry hostage inside the parliament building, along with several members of his government and a number of parliamentary staff.\textsuperscript{57} Reminiscent of the 1987 coups led by General Sitiveni Rabuka, Speight claimed to be defending the interests of indigenous Fijians against the supposed dominance of Indian-Fijians. The military command did not support this new coup. However, they suspended the constitution and supported a new government under Lisenia Qarase. Eventually, the hostages were released and Speight arrested. Chaudry, however, was not reinstated. Australia had already indicated it was prepared to accept such a solution, limiting its response to symbolic diplomatic sanctions.\textsuperscript{58}

In 2006 there was a further coup, after moves by the Qarase Government to grant pardons to those involved in the 2000 coup angered the armed forces chief, Commodore Frank Bainimarama. After months of destabilisation, the military finally


\textsuperscript{55} Ben Doherty, Connie Levett, and Misha Schubert, ‘Australia sends troops to riot-torn Tonga,’ The Age, 18 November 2006, p. 5; Steve Lewis and James Madden, ‘PM orders troops into Tonga,’ The Australian, 18 November 2006, p. 2.


\textsuperscript{57} The complexities of the coup cannot be entered into here; they have been fully recounted in Robbie Robertson and William Sutherland, \textit{Government by the gun: the unfinished business of Fiji’s 2000 coup}, Annandale, Pluto Press Australia, 2001.

took power in a bloodless coup early in December.\(^59\) The Police Commissioner, an 
Australian, threatened sedition charges against Bainimarama, but was forced to flee 
the country after receiving death threats.\(^60\) Qarase asked Australia to intervene 
against the coup. But again, the only response from Australia was the by now 
familiar diplomatic scolding.\(^61\)

Fiji now seemed to contravene Australia’s preference for democratic regimes more 
than any other country in the region. Even if there were to be a return to elected 
government, the possibility of further military involvement would always loom large. 
But Australia had no effective options for a response.\(^62\) Fiji was not nearly as 
dependent on Australian aid as many other countries in the region, and in both 1988 
and 2007, China and other Asian nations appeared as potential alternative sources of 
funds if Australia did cancel aid.\(^63\) Moreover, Fiji was not a ‘failed state’ in the sense 
of lacking a coherent government. On the contrary, Australian military intervention 
was made impossible precisely because of the strong position of the Fijian army. A 
well trained and professional organisation, they had no reason to invite Australian 
involvement in Fiji’s internal affairs, leaving only the inconceivable option of an 
outright Australian invasion.

**Pacific regionalism**

Finally, Australia’s new interventionist policy was manifest in a renewed focus on 
Pacific regionalism and in particular the functioning of the Pacific Islands Forum 
(PIF).\(^64\) This attention to regional affairs contrasted with the government’s earlier 
attitude, when the position of Minister for Pacific Island Affairs was abolished, and

---

\(^59\) Simon Kearney, ‘Army seizes control of Fiji,’ *The Australian*, 2 December 2006, p. 2; Simon 
4; O’Keefe, ‘Australia and fragile states in the Pacific,’ pp. 139-140; Cameron Stewart, ‘High noon in 

\(^60\) Michael McKenna, ‘Threats force police chief to flee Fiji,’ *The Australian*, 1 December 2006, p. 4.

\(^61\) Malcom Brown, ‘I’m still PM, says defiant Qarase,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 December 
2006, p. 9; Simon Kearney and Patrick Walters, ‘Fiji PM surrounded in home as army tightens grip,’ 
*The Australian*, 5 December 2006, p. 1; Greg Sheridan, ‘Howard correct in rejecting troop call,’ *The 


\(^63\) Graham Davis, ‘I’ll get help from China: Coup chief,’ *The Australian*, 30 December 2006, p. 3; 
David Glanz, ‘Dinky-di domination: Australian imperialism and the South Pacific,’ *Socialist Review*, 
no. 2 (1990), p. 58.

\(^64\) Known as the South Pacific Forum until 2000, the grouping brings together Australia, New Zealand 
and 14 sovereign Pacific Island states. The heads of government meet annually.
Howard failed to attend PIF meetings in 1998, 1999 and 2001.\(^{65}\) From 2000, however, Australia sought to construct

a state-centric community of Pacific island states managed by, but not
including, Australia. The community should embrace good governance,
democracy and neoliberal economic values and harmonise …border control
in a way that would suit Australia’s security concerns.\(^ {66}\)

The new approach was first apparent at the Forum meeting in 2000, which passed the ‘Biketawa Resolution’ on regional security at Australia’s insistence, despite objections from some countries, in particular in Melanesia.\(^ {67}\) The resolution pledged adherence to good governance and democratic institutions, as well as outlining new ways in which the Forum might respond to regional security issues. Controversially, the declaration abandoned the Forum’s previous emphasis on non-interference in members’ internal affairs. This paved the way for the Forum’s support for the RAMSI intervention, indicating how Australia saw regional infrastructure as helpful in advancing its own strategic priorities.

With the crisis in the Solomon Islands as backdrop, Australia pushed for further regional reform at the 2003 Forum. Canberra succeed in having former Australian diplomat Greg Urwin elected as the PIF’s Secretary-General, causing considerable disquiet by breaking with the tradition of having an islander serve in the position.\(^ {68}\) Howard also advocated regional economic integration, including some form of Pacific Island economic union.\(^ {69}\) It was openly argued that Pacific countries could not be economically viable if they insisted on maintaining full national sovereignty.


\(^{68}\) Steve Lewis and Claire Harvey, ‘Howard running into heavy weather at Pacific forum,’ The Australian, 15 August 2003, p. 1.

The most concrete outcome was that Australia established a regional police training facility in Fiji at this time, with an eye to a possible regional force structure in the future. For the most part, though, Canberra’s vision for regional integration seemed to amount to an extension of existing free trade agreements, but with Australia firmly envisaged as the centre of the regional economy. In Fry’s words ‘the community is to be built for Pacific island societies but on Australian terms.’

2. The Southwest Pacific and Australia’s changing imperial strategy

Taken together, the string of interventions into the internal workings of Southwest Pacific nations represented a dramatic display of Australia’s power in the region. However, while a novel tactic, ‘co-operative intervention’ was aimed at securing longstanding security interests, which originated in Australia’s position as a regional colonial power. It should not be forgotten that this formal colonial rule ended comparatively recently, in 1968 in Nauru and 1975 in PNG, leaving a legacy in which Australia is seen as the ‘natural’ centre of power in the region. This position was reinforced by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments in the 1990s, which sought to impose neo-liberal economic and governance reforms on the Pacific Island nations. As Fry describes, this policy ‘involved an intended level of intervention in Pacific island societies and states not contemplated since the colonial period.’

‘Cooperative intervention’ and the legitimisation of neo-colonialism

Many of the themes of the Howard government’s Pacific interventionism thus began under its predecessor. The existing focus on economic restructuring, ‘good governance’ and the role of the free market remained a constant under the new interventionist policy. There was, nonetheless, an important extension of the 1990s

---

reform agenda. This was the idea that not only should Australia impose economic and governance reforms on the Pacific Island nations through aid conditionality, but that Pacific governments were themselves unable to enact these reforms without direct outside involvement.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw not an improvement, but a deterioration in the Pacific’s economic performance and political stability. This suggested the need to impose even greater conditionality on Australian aid. The neo-liberal orthodoxy was taken to its extreme by Helen Hughes, of the CIS. She claimed that years of Australian aid had actually damaged the Pacific economies, and even criticised the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) for a lack of vigour in demanding reforms. The suggestion was that Australia should cut aid entirely, or at least apply a very strict conditionality, under which ‘Aid should cease to be a prop for governments unwilling to choose growth and development, and focus on assisting choices for growth.’

This free market fundamentalism, however, missed the point of Australia’s new interventionist policy. As discussed below, the aim was not to impose neo-liberal reforms for their own sake, but to prevent political instability. Simply casting the Pacific nations adrift would be self-defeating. This problem was recognised by White and Wainwright, who argued that ‘tough conditionality can create a ‘Catch 22’: a weak system which cannot fulfil [sic] its promises, and so misses out on help that might strengthen it.’ While aid conditionality might serve to secure easily verifiable macro-level reforms, for example the removal of formal trade barriers, it had proved less successful in achieving Australia’s desired micro-level reforms, such as reducing police corruption or improving service delivery capacity.

The solution was for Australia to assume direct responsibility over crucial government functions. This was the approach advocated by the ASPI report on the

---

74 Hughes, ‘Aid has failed the Pacific,’ pp. 19-26; Helen Hughes, ‘PNG in need for much more than just money,’ Executive Highlights no. 103, The Centre for Independent Studies, 2002
Solomon Islands, which argued that economic and political problems had become so grave there that ‘there [is not] any evidence to suggest that Solomon Islands can pull itself out of a fatal dive towards state failure.’ The government was now incapable of effectively spending further aid money. ASPI also favoured deeper Australian intervention in PNG, as they saw the ECP as not going far enough.

ASPI saw the Solomon Islands’ problems as stemming from the failure of the post-colonial state to effectively mesh with pre-existing indigenous political structures. As Fraenkel commented, however, such an analysis left a ‘full-scale takeover’ as the only option, and did not make clear how Australian involvement might come to an end. Reilly presented a similar picture of intractable chaos, claiming the Pacific was undergoing ‘Africanisation’, whereby endemic ethnic conflict over scarce resources destroyed democratic governance. Following Said, Chappell critiques this idea as ‘Orientalist’, because it ignores the ongoing impact of colonialism on Pacific societies. Moreover, as Firth notes, while almost all conflict in the Pacific has an ‘ethnic’ component, reference to such divisions fails to shed light on the specific causes of any given conflict. Despite their lack of explanatory power, such ideas made outside intervention seem necessary and morally justifiable.

If more subtly, the Australian government’s own documents also reveal an increasing concern with the inability of Pacific leaders to implement reforms. In 2002, Downer argued that

---

81 Wainwright, et al., ‘Our failing neighbour,’ p. 27.
82 Fraenkel, The manipulation of custom: From uprising to intervention in the Solomon Islands, p. 9.
Australia can provide technical and expert governance assistance, but to be effective it must be matched by political commitment and a willingness to pursue difficult reforms in partner countries.86

What, however, if such ‘commitment and willingness’ was not forthcoming? In 2004 an AusAID document signaled the shift towards a ‘more hands-on approach’ in which ‘The importance of Pacific island countries creating the right policy environment for growth and development will receive greater emphasis…’87 This was necessary because ‘Political leadership of reform has not been sustained and has been derailed in some instances by short-term political expediency and the self-interest of elites.’88 Indeed, the governance and nation-building capacity of the post-colonial states was doubtful. As a result, ‘The larger nations are not short of good legislation and policies. Their problems lie in an inability or lack of will to implement these policies.’89

For diplomatic reasons, the Howard government denied its interventionist policy amounted to ‘neo-colonialism’.90 But it is hard to know what else to label the introduction of Australian personnel to directly manage programs designed and funded by Canberra. The point was not been missed by commentators, both supportive and critical. Kelly tied himself in terminological knots, declaring Australia to somehow be ‘embark[ing] on a path of re-intervention as a metropolitan, not a neo-colonial, power’.91 White welcomed the fact that ‘fears of being accused of neo-colonialism no longer constrain a return to deeper levels of engagement with PNG than we have seen since independence in 1975.’92 For Fry and Kabutaulaka, the new interventionism redrew sovereignty in the region to the point of creating ‘a new form of trusteeship’.93 Fraenkel has likewise described the policy as a return to the ‘twilight of colonial rule, when colonial administrators wrestled with the problem of

88 Ibid., p. 15.
89 Ibid., p. 16.
90 For examples, see *Advancing the national interest: Australia’s foreign and trade policy White Paper*, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2003, p. 93; Tom Allard, ‘PM ready to send troops to Solomon,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 June 2003, p. 5; Kerin, ‘PM’s new Pacific solution - push for island union as Australia launches ‘Helpem Fren’,’91
developing suitable constitutions and nurturing responsible leaders.’94 He was commenting on the Solomon Islands, which is the most extreme case, but the same logic was at work in Australia’s other interventions.

Whatever label is applied, the capacity for Pacific nations to determine their own destinies was reduced by these interventions. Neo-liberal economic and governance reform policies have been presented as being politically neutral.95 Indeed the very terms ‘economic rationalism’ and ‘good governance’ imply that there are no substantial or political debates to be had, only technical problems in implementing a pre-determined policy consensus. This assumption of neutrality serves to hide the policies’ profound and often contentious impact on the economic and social life of Pacific countries, for example in areas such as land tenure and state-civil society relations. Already in 1998, Macdonald wrote of the contradiction in the governance agenda, which supposedly enhanced democracy, but actually removed power over key decisions on economic policy from Pacific governments.96 Australia’s new interventionism heightened this contradiction, assuming as it did that the solutions to the Pacific’s problems could only be found in the imposition of the standard Western model of the state and economy.97

**Strategic motivations for the new interventionism**

Assessing the motivation for Australia’s new policy of intervention in the Pacific is not straightforward. The government itself listed a variety of ‘transnational’ security problems in the Pacific nations which might affect Australia if left unchecked, including money laundering, people smuggling, drug trafficking, the spread of HIV/AIDS and terrorism.98 No doubt genuine concern about these problems, which

---

in fact stretch back to Bilney’s agenda in the early 1990s, were indeed part of the motivation for the new policy.

It must be questioned, however, whether any of these transnational issues in themselves warranted such substantial and dramatic new deployments of military and civilian personnel. Australian police, for instance, already had a longstanding program of operating in the Pacific to counter transnational organised crime. More importantly the ability of such issues to serve as a public justification for a foreign policy actually driven by other concerns should not be underestimated. In particular, Australia’s supposed concern about terrorists using weak Pacific states as a base of operations was purely rhetoric for public consumption. There is no evidence of any such activity in the region, and it is unclear why terrorists would seek to base themselves in countries where they enjoy no local support and where small communities would make clandestine activity difficult. A ‘failing state’ may actually hinder terrorist operations, which have complex logistical requirements and can themselves be adversely affected by lawlessness in their base areas.

Ultimately, the motivation for Australia’s new interventionism should be sought in deeper challenges to the national interest. This thesis has argued that Australian foreign policy is determined by intermingled economic and strategic concerns stemming from competition with other major powers in the region. In the Southwest Pacific, Australia’s economic concerns may seem to be central, because its regional weight stems from its economic importance, which formal decolonisation did not bring to an end. For example in 2003, trade with Australia constituted 46% of PNG’s exports and 55% of imports, 21% of Vanuatu’s exports and 43% of imports,


100 The United States’ involvement in Latin America under the rubric of the ‘war on drugs’ is a case in point.

101 For critical discussion, see Fry, ‘The war on terror and the new interventionism,’ pp. 73, 83-84; Beth Greener-Barcham and Manuhuia Barcham, ‘Terrorism in the South Pacific? Thinking critically about approaches to security in the region,’ *Australian Journal Of International Affairs* 60, no. 1 (2006), pp. 73-75; O’Keeffe, ‘Australia and fragile states in the Pacific,’ p. 131. Many commentators, however, simply take government pronouncements about terrorism at face value, for example Jim Rolfe, ‘Oceania and terrorism: Some linkages with the wider region and the necessary responses,’ *Working Paper* no. 19/04, Centre for Strategic Studies: New Zealand, 2004; Wainwright, ‘Responding to state failure - the case of Australia and Solomon Islands,’ p. 489.

and 28% of the Solomon Islands’ imports.\textsuperscript{103} Australia was also the largest bilateral aid donor to the Pacific in this period.\textsuperscript{104} But while Australia was extremely important for the Pacific economies, the reverse was not the case. Australia’s most important trading partner among the island nations was PNG, but in 2004-2005 it only rated as the 21\textsuperscript{st} most important destination for Australian merchandise exports, and 19\textsuperscript{th} for services exports, constituting just under 1% of the total of each.\textsuperscript{105}

Securing commercial opportunities was identified as a secondary motivation for intervention in larger countries such as PNG and the Solomon Islands.\textsuperscript{106} The Howard government was also determined to secure what economic advantage it could from regional economic liberalisation, for example ensuring the Pacific nations extended it the same free trade access being granted to Europe.\textsuperscript{107} However, such economic opportunities did not warrant the large sums of money spent by the government on its intervention program. The payoff was not in potential economic gains for Australia, but rather on preventing potential instability caused by the Pacific’s economic problems.

Such instability was not a concern in itself. Rather, it again raised Australia’s fear of strategic penetration of the region by potentially hostile major powers. In particular, the rise of China as a Pacific power came to be the focus of these concerns, although Japan and Taiwan were also seen as potential competitors in the region. There were some dissenting voices,\textsuperscript{108} but there was in this period a high level of agreement among Australian strategic commentators that China’s rise posed a risk, including


\textsuperscript{104}Figures for 2002 are given in Pacific regional aid strategy 2004-2009, p. 38. This excludes the very large aid transfers from France to its dependent territories, see Papua New Guinea and the Pacific - A development perspective, pp. 12-13.

\textsuperscript{105}Total merchandise trade with PNG outweighed trade with all other Pacific island nations combined. Composition of trade Australia: 2006-07, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2007, pp. 56, 66, 76.


\textsuperscript{107}Stewart Firth, The impact of globalisation on the Pacific Islands, International Labour Office, April, 2005, pp. 4-5.

\textsuperscript{108}For example, Christian Hirst, ‘The paradigm shift: 11 September and Australia’s strategic reformation,’ Australian Journal Of International Affairs 61, no. 2 (2007); Yongjin Zhang, ‘China and the emerging regional order in the South Pacific,’ Australian Journal Of International Affairs 61, no. 3 (2007).
the possibility of Australia becoming embroiled in wider conflict involving Japan, China, Taiwan and the United States.\textsuperscript{109} This gave rise to a fear that China or other powers might take advantage of regional instability to gain strategic bases close to Australia. A number of commentators made it clear that concerns about strategic penetration necessitated a stronger Australian stance in the Pacific.\textsuperscript{110} In turn, China’s growing economic and diplomatic clout in the region was also seen as a problem, especially the impact of competition with Taiwan over diplomatic recognition in undermining Australia’s reform efforts.\textsuperscript{111}

The strategic context of the new interventionism was made plain in the government’s own documents, although not mentioning China by name. Already in 2000, the Defence White Paper argued that regional instability should be countered in order to ‘prevent the positioning in neighbouring states of foreign forces that might be used to attack Australia.’\textsuperscript{112} The Foreign Affairs White Paper in 2003 argued that ‘Instability in the South Pacific affects our ability to protect large and significant approaches to Australia’,\textsuperscript{113} while the Defence Update in the same year spelled out in detail the military’s concern over growing instability in PNG, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu


\textsuperscript{111} See Atkinson, ‘Vanuatu in Australia-China-Taiwan relations,’ pp. 351-360.


\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Advancing the national interest: Australia’s foreign and trade policy White Paper}, p. 93.
and Fiji. Howard also made semi-veiled references to concern over China, warning in 2006 that

there are countries other than countries that are geographically part of the region which have an interest in involving themselves and gathering allies and partners in the region…

Later that year, he argued that if Australia did not intervene in the region, Pacific nations might ‘fall into the hands of evil from other countries’.

In addition, Pacific instability had the potential to complicate Australia’s strategic relations with Indonesia and PNG. It was reported that shortly before the RAMSI intervention, the Solomon Islands government requested a military intervention from Indonesia. While perhaps never likely to take place, any suggestion that Indonesia might extend its influence into the Pacific would be frowned on by Australia. There was also concern that instability in PNG and West Papua could be mutually reinforcing, potentially drawing Australia into conflict with Indonesia.

Simultaneously, the conflict in the Solomon Islands was seen as further destabilising PNG, because of armed militants operating across the border with Bougainville, prompting rumors PNG might also intervene militarily in its neighbour.

As with East Timor in 1999, the Howard government therefore found that Australia’s longstanding strategic interests could only be defended by what was a radical new policy position, which O’Keefe has perceptively dubbed ‘hegemonic multilateralism’.

While seeking the approval of the PIF and practical assistance from New Zealand, Australia entrenched itself as the Southwest Pacific security hegemon, answerable to no-one but itself as regional policeman. On the other hand, a

---

failure to tackle the Pacific’s mounting instability would have reduced Australia’s global standing as a regional power. This problem was often expressed as the need to fulfill Australia’s ‘responsibilities’ in the region.\textsuperscript{121} Therefore, while backed by the United States diplomatically, Australia’s interventionism was neither driven by nor limited by Washington’s priorities.\textsuperscript{122} Likewise, France was rejected as an alliance partner in RAMSI, to ensure Australia’s control.\textsuperscript{123}

Finally, however, it should be noted that there were limits to how far the logic of strategic stability could push Australia towards regional intervention. First, the Fijian military had the strength to reject Australian intervention. Any attempt at a military solution would have been self-defeating, greatly increasing regional instability. Second, the removal of police from PNG in the face of the constitutional ruling striking out their immunity revealed that Canberra still felt obliged to respect the formal framework of PNG’s sovereignty, even while seeking to reduce the constraints on its actions which that sovereignty imposed. Again, to force intervention beyond this limit would have been to risk a political crisis greater than the problems which Australia was attempting to address.

3. Australian interventionism and the precedent of East Timor

Problems in locating the shift in Australian policy

Generally, the turning point in Australia’s new interventionism has been located in the 2003 intervention in the Solomon Islands. RAMSI has, for example, been described as a ‘massive U-turn’\textsuperscript{124} and a ‘paradigm shift’.\textsuperscript{125} Moreover, Australia’s


\textsuperscript{122} For a useful discussion of alliance politics and Australia’s interventionism, see O’Keefe, ‘Australia and fragile states in the Pacific,’ p. 148.


\textsuperscript{124} Dobell, ‘Australia’s intervention policy,’ p. 54.

failure to take more robust action in the Solomon Islands before 2003, even though it was repeatedly requested to do so, has resulted in some commentators arguing that the ‘war on terror’ was Canberra’s prime motivation for eventual intervention.¹²⁶ In particular, the Bali terrorist attack of 2002 is seen as forcing the Australian government to prevent a regional ‘breeding ground’ for terrorism. There is also a flip-side to this argument, that the RAMSI deployment was an excuse to withdraw troops from the unpopular war in Iraq, while still seeming to fulfill its commitment to the US led anti-terror campaign.¹²⁷

Undoubtedly, the RAMSI deployment was a major turning point in Australian policy in its own right. Nonetheless, as Dobell writes, there is a long history of Australian military intervention in the region, including in East Timor and Bougainville, the legacy of which has affected subsequent Australian actions.¹²⁸ The argument presented here is that the 1999 deployment to East Timor should be accorded greater weight in the development of Australia’s policy of regional intervention than it has been previously.

This is not a question of direct causality. The East Timor intervention did not dictate that Australia should subsequently intervene in regional trouble spots. Nor, in turn, did the Solomon Islands deployment. Each of the Pacific interventions was ultimately driven by the specific Australian interests at risk. However, there is a deeper link with events in East Timor than a superficial similarity in policy, or even similarity in Australian strategic goals. The 1999 East Timor intervention created a climate in which the deployment of Australian troops in the region had come to be seen as necessary, acceptable and indeed expected, both by the policy making community and the wider public. Moreover, the confidence and resources of the Australian state were greatly boosted by its success in East Timor. Without this,

¹²⁷ Daniel Flitton, ‘A Pacific escape: Australia, the United States and the Solomon Islands,’ Australian Quarterly (2003), pp. 6-8; Fry, ‘The war on terror and the new interventionism,’ pp. 76-78.
albeit often intangible, legacy of the 1999 deployment, it is unlikely Australia would have developed such a pro-active regional interventionism.

The apparent lack of Australian activity in the Solomon Islands before 2003, however, does require some explanation. While no final judgment on government decision making in 2000 is yet possible, evidently the government did not consider the threat to Australia’s interests sufficient to warrant a full scale military intervention, with associated costs and risks.\(^\text{129}\) Although seemingly weak compared to the East Timor deployment, Australia’s attempt to foster a peace process in the Solomon Islands in 2000 was in itself not an insignificant undertaking, having many parallels with its efforts in Bougainville, which were by then bearing fruit. It should also be remembered that in 2000 Australia still had heavy military commitments in East Timor, reducing resources available for the Solomon Islands.\(^\text{130}\) Moreover, Canberra would have wanted to avoid creating a precedent of intervention simply because of the request of elected governments, given that it was not prepared to do so at this time in response to the Fiji coup.

Subsequently, political and military resources were largely committed to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The fact that troops were withdrawn from Iraq to be sent to the Solomon Islands in 2003 demonstrates how stretched military resources now were, between fulfilling Australia’s alliance commitments and dealing with local problems (rather than constituting a ruse to placate the United States).\(^\text{131}\) By 2003, however, the perception of risk to Australian interests in the Solomon Islands had greatly increased. This was not due to the spectre of regional terrorism, but because of the failure of the more hands-off Australian policy, the potential for instability to spread to PNG, and the prospect of intervention by Indonesia or PNG.

**The East Timor deployment and Australian strategic thinking**

O’Keefe has written that Australia’s Pacific interventionism differed from previous policy in

\(^{129}\) Barker’s argument that the Australian government simply misunderstood the gravity of the situation in 2000 is a distinct possibility. Geoffrey Barker, ‘Solomon chaos a sad day for Australian diplomacy,’ *The Australian Financial Review*, 7 June 2000, p. 10.


A gradual yet dramatic increase in the capability to intervene, a shift from unilateralism to multilateral ‘coalitions of the willing’, and the strategic interests belied by Canberra’s justifications for intervention.\textsuperscript{132}

All of these features, however, can be traced back to the intervention in East Timor. This is in contrast to the relative obscurity into which the (also successful) Bougainville peace process fell, despite the relevance of this precedent for the situation in the Solomon Islands in particular.

After 1999, the immediate focus of Australian strategic concerns shifted to the Southwest Pacific. Although the future of Indonesia remained somewhat uncertain, prospects for its imminent disintegration gradually faded. Nonetheless, Australia’s security situation continued to be discussed under the same ‘arc of instability’ label, even as it was partially subsumed within the wider ‘war on terror’.\textsuperscript{133} Conceptually, the image of the ‘arc’ performed a dual function in Australian strategic thinking.\textsuperscript{134} First, it homogenised the diverse internal problems facing the Pacific nations into one overarching phenomena. Indeed, the various crises in the Pacific came to be seen as being causally linked, demanding a more robust overall Australian policy.\textsuperscript{135} Second, as a geo-strategic term, it reconstructed what were actually social and economic problems as being primarily security issues, the proper preserve of military and police interventions.

Both geographically and analytically, East Timor became the anchor point for the Pacific ‘arc of instability’, following on from its position as the focus of Australian concerns surrounding political change in Indonesia. As a dramatic and successful example of military intervention, East Timor played a crucial role in solidifying Australian perceptions of its strategic challenges and policy options in the Pacific, becoming a reference point against which later interventions could be analysed and justified. In accordance with this conceptual role, East Timor was partially re-imagined as a Pacific, rather than Asian, nation in Australian minds. Practically,

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., p. 141.
\textsuperscript{133} For two examples which bracket the period under discussion, see Paul Dibb, ‘Strategic force for mounting instability,’ \textit{The Australian}, 16 May 2006, p. 12; Greg Sheridan, ‘Adrift in an ocean of instability,’ \textit{The Australian}, 22 May 2000, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{134} See Robert Ayson, ‘The ‘arc of instability’ and Australia’s strategic policy,’ \textit{Australian Journal Of International Affairs} 61, no. 2 (2007), pp. 218-221.
Australia certainly treated East Timor like other Southwest Pacific nations during this period, undertaking diplomatic, security and economic activities there which would be unthinkable in any other Southeast Asian state. Intellectually, East Timor sometimes, but by no means always, came to be seen as part of the Pacific. For example, in 2006 Downer wrote that ‘The island states of the Pacific, including Papua New Guinea and near neighbour East Timor, face similar, often daunting challenges…’ The 2007 Defence Update likewise discusses the internal problems of the ‘South Pacific Island states and East Timor’ as one phenomena. The trend was stronger among non-government commentators. The case for considering East Timor as ‘Pacific’ has been explicitly argued for by Cotton, and the Lowy Institute included East Timor under the ambit of its new ‘Melanesia’ project.

The most significant development in Australian strategic thinking arising from the East Timor intervention was the legitimisation of the use of military force as a policy tool in the region. It has been noted that the Pacific interventions relied very heavily on police, rather than military, operations. While true to an extent, the role of Australian military predominance in the region should not be overlooked. It is this power which provides unspoken credibility to all of Australia’s actions as the guarantor of regional stability, even when they take non-military form. More specifically, overwhelming military force was deployed at the start of the Solomon Islands intervention, and was the basis of Australia’s immediate reaction in 2006 to riots both in the Solomon Islands and in Tonga. This was a lesson learnt in East Timor, where a relatively weak police presence in the lead up to the independence ballot proved a liability. In contrast, Interfet (International Force for East Timor) was

---

137 Australia’s national security: A defence update, Department of Defence, 2007, p. 18.
premised on a continual dominance of military force, which facilitated Australia’s
goal of an orderly transfer of political power.

At the level of grand strategy, East Timor was the beginning of Australia’s concern
about ‘failed states’ in the region, and the conviction that this challenge could be met
through Australian intervention. Many commentators locate the decisive influence on
Australian policy in this regard as the ‘war on terror’. Lambach, for instance, argues
that Australia only moved to ‘securitise’ the issue of failed states in 2003.141 But the
first instance in which Australia confronted a collapse of state authority in the region
was Indonesia’s loss of control over East Timor. While for diplomatic reasons
Australia studiously maintained its public recognition of Indonesia’s authority in the
territory, it was this absence of clear state authority in practice which brought about
Australia’s security intervention.

Hirst argues that the ‘war on terror’ ushered in a ‘paradigm shift’ in Australian
strategic policy, in which the old focus on the ‘defence of Australia’ had become
redundant, because geography was no longer the determining factor in international
conflict.142 While some government rhetoric supports this view, it does not accord
with the government’s own policy focus on regional instability. Moreover, both Dibb
and White, cited by Hirst as mired in old strategic conceptions, strongly supported
these regional deployments.143 Dibb argued that the new position should be seen as
an extension rather than a repudiation of the previous doctrine, labeling it a ‘regional
defence of Australia’.144 More dramatically, White suggested that it was time to
move beyond old arguments about a ‘continental’ versus ‘expeditionary’ defence
structures.145 On the other hand, Dupont, while maintaining his criticisms of those

410-411. See also Kabutaulaka, ‘Australian Foreign Policy and the RAMSI Intervention in Solomon
Islands,’ pp. 287-291.
143 As already discussed, White actually played an instrumental role in forging Australia’s
interventionist policy. For Dibb’s views, see Paul Dibb, ‘Is strategic geography relevant to Australia’s
current defence policy?’ *Australian Journal Of International Affairs* 60, no. 2 (2006), pp. 250-253,
261; Dibb, ‘Strategic force for mounting instability.’
145 Hugh White, ‘Beyond the defence of Australia,’ *Lowy Institute Paper* no. 16, Lowy Institute for
International Policy, 2006, pp. vii-ix, 45-57. See also Geoffrey Barker, ‘It’s the home front, stupid,’
who privileged geographic determinants of defence policy, also emphasised the
importance of military deployments to stabilise Australia’s immediate region.146

Without minimising the importance of ongoing debates about Australia’s force
structure or the threats facing Australia, there was, then, something of a new
consensus among the strategic policy community. It did not centre on how to combat
terrorism or manage the alliance with the United States, but rather on the need for a
more aggressive defence of Australia’s interests in the immediate region. Again, this
shift in thinking can be dated back to the 1999 East Timor deployment.

The ‘deputy sheriff’ patrols ‘our patch’

The Howard government’s new Pacific interventionism was facilitated in this period
by a strengthening of the state apparatus needed for the deployment of force
overseas, as well as the emergence of a broad ideological consensus supporting the
policy. While not the only factor in this process, the 1999 East Timor intervention
reinforced Australia’s long-term pretensions to major power status in the region, as
well as crystallising a new found confidence in its ability to shape its strategic
environment. This boost to national morale was summed up in the so-called ‘Howard
doctrine’. There was also ongoing reference to the idea that the East Timor
deployment was an example of ‘Australia’s defence of its values in the world’,147 or
that it represented a ‘coming of age’ for the nation in international affairs, as argued
by Minister Tony Abbott.148 While Howard’s casting of Australia as regional
policeman was met with some derision at the time, in the following years it was
amply fulfilled, although not as a ‘deputy’ to the United States, but on its own
terms.149

That this was a proper role for Australia to play was accepted across the mainstream
political spectrum, with no significant voices in opposition. The general support from

146 While at the same time developing the ability to operate in coalition operations around the world.
Alan Dupont, ‘The strategic implications of an independent East Timor,’ in Out of the ashes:
Destruction and reconstruction of East Timor, ed. James Fox and Dionisio Babo Soares, Canberra,
147 Advancing the national interest: Australia’s foreign and trade policy White Paper, p. 3. The White
Paper explicitly stressed the importance of Australian ‘confidence’, see Advancing the national
interest: Australia’s foreign and trade policy White Paper, p. viii.
148 Cited in Darren Gray and Stephen Cauchi, ‘Nation ‘coming of age’: Abbott,’ The Age, 5 January
2002, p. 5.
the political Left for Australian militarism following the East Timor deployment flowed into the new Pacific interventionism. For example, in 2000, both the Labor and Democrats leaders criticised the government for not doing enough in the Solomon Islands, citing East Timor as a precedent.\footnote{Robert Garran, ‘Commonwealth’s Pacific crackdown,’ \textit{The Australian}, 8 June 2000, p. 8; Brendan Nicholson, ‘Downer plans peace mission to Solomons,’ \textit{The Age}, 8 June 2000, p. 13.} In 2003 Greens leader Bob Brown argued that the Solomons Islands intervention should have come much sooner, saying that instead of following the priorities of the United States, ‘We have maintained always [sic] that we needed to be putting much more into… security in the neighbourhood.’\footnote{Cited in \textit{The World Today - Australian Defence Association says Solomons action should have been taken sooner}, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 26.06.2003 (accessed 15.09.2008, http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2003/s888867.htm).} In the lead up to the 2007 Federal election, new Labor leader Kevin Rudd likewise criticised the war in Iraq as a humanitarian disaster, and argued that Australian troops should instead be confronting terrorism and political instability ‘here in our own region, our own neighbourhood, our own backyard.’\footnote{Kevin Rudd, \textit{Fresh ideas for future challenges: A new approach to Australia’s arc of instability}, Australian Labor Party, 2007 (accessed 15.09.2008, http://www.alp.org.au/media/0707/speloo050.php).}

From more Right-wing perspectives, a policy of intervention was frequently justified in terms of living up to Australia’s ‘responsibilities’ in the region, as discussed above. Again, the precedent of East Timor was not forgotten. In 2000, for example, the government was berated for having ‘a culture of cringe towards our regional responsibilities’,\footnote{O’Callaghan, ‘It’s time to take a stand.’ O’Callaghan also drew a link between East Timor and the Solomon Islands, see Mary-Louise O’Callaghan, ‘PNG can do with Howard’s loose talk,’ \textit{The Australian}, 8 June 2000, p. 15.} and for not having ‘learnt the lesson of East Timor: the US and other greater powers regard Australia as the custodian of democratic values in the region, and expect it to act accordingly.’\footnote{Editorial, ‘Another Pacific democracy falls,’ \textit{The Age}, 7 June 2000, p. 16.}

The Howard government eventually embraced this rhetoric, arguing that Australia had ‘a particular responsibility to help the countries of the South Pacific’.\footnote{Advancing the national interest: Australia’s foreign and trade policy \textit{White Paper}, p. xvii.} In justifying the RAMSI intervention Howard declared that this is very much our patch. Australia is the largest and strongest country in the region and quite properly the countries around the world expect Australia to shoulder the burden and we do.\footnote{Advancing the national interest: Australia’s foreign and trade policy \textit{White Paper}, p. xvii.}
In slightly more restrained language, this was a return to the post-Interfet talk of Australia being the region’s ‘deputy sheriff’. Having publicly downplayed links between the Solomon Islands and Timor in 2000, Downer now explicitly made the connection, arguing that ‘We did a great job in East Timor, we did a great job in Afghanistan and in Iraq; we couldn’t have people saying: How come you did absolutely nothing in Solomons [sic]?’ Contemplating the importance of the Interfet experience for subsequent regional policy, military analyst Alan Ryan explained

The situation in Timor provides a precedent that cannot be ignored…

Australia [had] the responsibility to offer its assistance to help resolve an intolerable situation as a good neighbour and significant regional power…

Such responsibilities could only be met if Australia possessed sufficient military power. The East Timor deployment was thus used to justify a substantial boost to military spending. What should also be noted here, however, is that this spending was always regarded as being of use in future deployments throughout the Pacific. The military and defence bureaucracy used the difficulties faced in Timor to argue for more funds, but made explicit that this spending was needed to sustain potential multiple deployments in the region. As Daley argued when it was announced Australia’s infantry forces would be increased

nobody should think that the decision to raise two new battalions of 3000 soldiers is specifically about East Timor… While Australia’s massive East Timor deployment highlighted the nation’s military weaknesses, the additional battalions have been raised to meet other contingencies… in the region, which our strategic analysts have come to call the ‘arc of chaos’.

---

158 O’Callaghan, ‘Pacific policeman.’
The logic was made clear in the 2000 Defence White Paper, which referred to East Timor to rationalise the raising of additional forces, but also already expressed concerns about wider Pacific instability affecting Australia’s defence position. It argued that

In the Southwest Pacific, as in Papua New Guinea, our aim is to maintain our position as the key strategic partner. Australian interests in a stable and secure Southwest Pacific are matched by significant responsibilities as leader and regional power. We would be very likely to provide substantial support in the unlikely event that any country in the Southwest Pacific faced substantial external aggression.\(^{162}\)

Low level military operations such as peacekeeping would be a key to maintaining this position, in which

- We should be prepared to be the largest force contributor to such operations.
- Our planning needs to acknowledge that we could be called upon to undertake several operations simultaneously, as we are at present in East Timor, Bougainville and the Solomon Islands.\(^{163}\)

This military buildup was supplemented by the creation in 2004 of a section of the Australian Federal Police specifically trained for overseas intervention, the International Deployment Group, involving several hundred officers.\(^{164}\) In response to situations such as the Honiara riots, the role of this group was increasingly seen as including paramilitary functions, and the force was expanded to around 1200 officers, including a rapid deployment anti-riot component.\(^{165}\) In 2007 it was announced that armoured vehicles would be procured for the group, solely for use overseas.\(^{166}\) A new training facility was also created near Canberra, in which officers could live and work in a mock Pacific village.\(^{167}\)

---

\(^{162}\) Defence 2000: Our future defence force, pp. 43-44.
\(^{163}\) Ibid., p. 48.
\(^{165}\) Marni Cordell, ‘Don’t mention the riots,’ New Matilda (online), 12 September, 2007; Patrick Walters, ‘Overseas police to double,’ The Australian, 22 August 2006, p. 1.
\(^{166}\) Mark Dodd, ‘AFP to form paramilitary wing,’ The Australian, 26 July 2007, p. 5.
\(^{167}\) Marni Cordell, ‘This is not a theme park,’ New Matilda (online), 17 October, 2007.
4. The second Australian intervention in East Timor

In April 2006, widespread civil violence again broke out in East Timor. By the end of May, up to 38 people were dead, dozens were injured and around 150,000 had been made homeless. Sections of the East Timorese army were in open revolt, and there had been armed clashes between army and police personnel. On May 25th, the Australian military once more landed in Dili.

In such circumstances, Marx’s dictum that tragic history is repeated as farce springs readily to mind. But if this latest intervention was indeed a farce, it was a bitterly ironic one. In 1999, Australia’s ostensible mission was to ‘save’ the East Timorese from foreign oppression and uphold their democratic choice for national independence; now Australia was saving them from themselves, intervening in East Timor’s internal political affairs and helping to ensure the downfall of the elected government.

The return of civil violence; the return of Australian troops

The full details of who was responsible for this new outbreak of violence in East Timor remain unclear. The basic events, however, can be quickly summarised. In January, members of the East Timorese army, known as the ‘petitioners’, lodged a complaint about alleged discrimination against personnel who came from the Western areas of the country. In February, several hundred of the petitioners abandoned their barracks, and most were dismissed from service in March. In response, they held protests in Dili over several days in late April. With the petitioners joined by increasing numbers of civilians, the protests degenerated into a series of clashes between various groups of protestors and police, as well as military personnel who were now deployed in the city, leading to several deaths.

At this point, the East Timorese state began to fracture. Military Police commander Alfredo Reinado deserted along with a number of his men and other supporters on May 3rd. Lodged in the hills outside Dili, they engaged in heavy fighting with loyal army and police personnel on May 23rd. There were also a number of clashes in and around Dili between army and police units. In the worst incident, on May 25th, eight

---

168 Report of the United Nations Independent Special Commission of Inquiry for Timor-Leste, United Nations, 2 October, 2006, p. 42. This report is the most comprehensive account of the events in the first half of 2006, and unless otherwise noted forms the basis for the discussion below.
police officers were killed and 27 seriously injured at their Dili headquarters when fired on by army personnel, despite United Nations (UN) police having arranged a local ceasefire.

In addition to conflict among the state security forces, there was increasing violence between groups of rival armed civilians in and around Dili, often organised into gangs based on geographic origin. This conflict started in late April, but increased dramatically from late May. Often the houses of rival groups were razed, resulting in the internal displacement of tens of thousands of people. This violence was worsened by the fact that large numbers of both police and military weapons had been distributed to various civilian groups.

There is no space here for a full discussion of the causes of the conflict, which were rooted in the complexities of post-independence economic, social and political problems. However, it is important to address a very common perception in Australia that it was primarily ‘ethnic’ in nature, because conflict within the security forces and among civilian groups was organised on the basis of an ‘east-west’ geographical division. This axis has long been one way of understanding the multitude of cultural-linguistic groups in East Timor. Its basis as a division in the security forces arose out of the Indonesian occupation and was then consolidated during the United Nations interregnum. However, as McWilliam argues, before 2006 the east-west division was not much remarked on in wider society, and was certainly not a defining political feature which rendered the nation into two distinct and antagonistic parts. The 2006 conflict was itself as much a cause as a consequence of an east-west ‘ethnic’ partition, crystallising this division as perhaps the dominant way of viewing national politics. Of particular importance in this regard was a speech given by President Xanana Gusmão on March 23rd, in which he

---


170 Although conflicting political loyalties were also an important source of division within the state security forces, see Sven Gunnar Simonsen, ‘The authoritarian temptation in East Timor: Nation building and the need for inclusive governance,’ *Asian Survey* 46, no. 5 (2006), pp. 588-592.

gave credence to the idea that the problems in the military were caused by a fundamental east-west divide.\textsuperscript{172}

The often heard criticism in 1999, that Australia took too long to intervene in East Timor, was certainly not applicable in 2006. Howard first offered to intervene if requested on May 5\textsuperscript{th}, and by May 12\textsuperscript{th} naval vessels were headed to Darwin, where hundreds of soldiers embarked. These moves came despite repeated denials from Foreign Minister José Ramos-Horta that foreign intervention was necessary.\textsuperscript{173} As the situation deteriorated, the East Timorese government did request Australian intervention on May 24\textsuperscript{th}, although in the form of police rather than military personnel. This option was rejected by Australia, whose special forces took over Dili airport the next day in preparation for the arrival of hundreds of soldiers.\textsuperscript{174}

The situation was complicated, however, by an overt power struggle among the East Timorese leadership, between President Xanana Gusmão and José Ramos-Horta on the one hand, and Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and his Fretilin (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) party on the other. The request for outside intervention was reportedly favoured mainly by Gusmão and Ramos-Horta, against the reservations of Alkatiri, who wanted to negotiate some measure of East Timorese control over the actions of any international forces. Partly in response to this disagreement, Gusmão assumed sole powers over the East Timorese security forces late in May.\textsuperscript{175} As it was, when Australian forces landed, a written request for intervention had been received, but the terms of that intervention were still in the process of being negotiated.\textsuperscript{176} Howard proclaimed that

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{172} The UN inquiry labeled this speech as ‘more divisive than helpful’. \textit{Report of the United Nations Independent Special Commission of Inquiry for Timor-Leste}, p. 22.


\textsuperscript{176} Dodd and Kerr, ‘Alkatiri wavers on troops.’
\end{footnotes}
We will go in without any conditionality… We’ve made a judgment that the situation is deteriorating so badly if we were to wait until we got three or four signatures on paper it might be [sic] significant further bloodshed and damaged property.  

Alkatiri was eventually forced to resign on June 26th. The final straw was the broadcast of a Four Corners report on Australian television detailing allegations that Alkatiri, along with Interior Minster Rogerio Lobato, had distributed weapons to civilians, and had ordered hit squads to murder their political opponents. Gusmão used this report to openly demand Alkatiri step down, threatening to quit himself if this demand was not met. Lobato was later convicted of distributing arms. But although a UN inquiry also accused Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri of knowing about weapons distribution, charges against him were later dropped due to a lack of evidence. Moreover, the allegation that Alkatiri had ordered political killings were false. Other journalists had reportedly already investigated them and found them to be baseless, and probably politically motivated.

Alkatiri’s downfall did not resolve the conflict in East Timor. While putting an end to major armed clashes among the state security forces, Australian troops were far less successful at curtailing conflict among civilians. In particular, arson attacks remained common, and many actually lost their houses after the arrival of the Australian military. Partly this was caused by the incapacity of military forces, as

---

181 John Martinikus, ‘A prime minister deposed, but at great cost to East Timor’s people,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 10 July 2006, p. 9; O’Shea and Martinikus, Transcript of Dateline: East Timor - downfall of a Prime Minister.
opposed to police, to control civil violence. But Fretilin supporters, many from the east of the country, tended to bear the brunt of this destruction. There was a strong perception among them that Australian forces were biased against Fretilin, and deliberately allowed their houses to be destroyed.

The credibility of, and popular support for, Australia as a neutral security force was further undermined by a number of incidents over the following months. There were several armed clashes with displaced persons and youth gangs in Dili, including the fatal shooting of two men in February 2007. Despite Australian forces knowing of Alfredo Reinado’s location, and even providing him with a bodyguard at times, there was no move to arrest him until March 2007, when a raid on his hideout was botched. Finally, there were allegations that the Australian military interfered in the presidential and parliamentary election campaigns in 2007 to the detriment of the Fretilin party, including intimidating supporters at rallies and preventing candidates moving freely around the country. Meanwhile, the Australian military settled in for a long stay in East Timor, constructing a sizeable and seemingly permanent base in Dili. As the Howard government came to an end, there was no indication of when Australian forces might vacate their newest neighbour.

---

183 A point conceded by Australian military sources. Lindsay Murdoch, ‘Protest convoy threatens to wreak more havoc,’ The Age, 6 June 2006, p. 3; Lindsay Murdoch, ‘Troops appear impotent as wild youth gangs call the shots,’ The Age, 5 June 2006, p. 2.
184 Interview with an anonymous NGO worker in East Timor, 08.11.2007, Dili; Interview with Setyo Budi, 08.11.2007, Dili; Interview with Oscar da Silva, 14.11.2007, Dili; Interview with Tomas Freitas, 13.11.2007, Dili; Interview with Nuno Rodriguez, 10.11.2007, Dili. See also Martinkus, ‘A prime minister deposed, but at great cost to East Timor’s people.’
187 Interview with Oscar da Silva; Lindsay Murdoch, ‘Australian troops accused of poll intimidation,’ The Age, 7 May 2007, p. 3; Lindsay Murdoch, ‘Timor protest over digger,’ The Age, 28 March 2007, p. 3; Interview with Nuno Rodriguez; Interview with José Teixeira, 21.11.2007, Dili.
**Australia’s role in East Timor’s regime change**

In many ways, the Australian military’s return to East Timor was just another example of ‘co-operative intervention’. As preparations for the intervention were underway, Howard again declared that ‘The Pacific is our backyard and we are the country that has the prime responsibility for looking after the security exigencies as they arise.’\(^{189}\) Canberra’s insistence that it would deal with the situation without the involvement of either the United States or especially the UN also conformed with the general pattern of Australia asserting itself as the pre-eminent regional power.\(^{190}\) Even as East Timor’s independence was being secured, there was concern among the Australian strategic policy community that the emergence of a regime that was stable and friendly towards Australia was by no means guaranteed. The fragmentation of the East Timorese state represented one of the worst case scenarios from this point of view, second only to renewed conflict between East Timor and Indonesia. As with the other Pacific interventions, then, this deployment secured important strategic goals, while being presented publicly as helping the East Timorese and coming at their request.

To a greater extent than the preceding interventions, however, the legitimacy of the East Timor deployment was quickly drawn into question. This was inevitable given the far sharper political divisions in East Timor than elsewhere, as well as the manner in which Alkatiri was forced to step down. Moreover, it was not hard to find a possible motive for Australian interference in East Timor’s internal political dispute. Alkatiri had not won any friends in Canberra through his negotiating stance regarding energy rights, nor for his attempts to counter Australian influence in East Timor by building links with other countries such as Portugal and China. Doubts about his government would only have been confirmed by its growing inability to maintain order. The rise of a new, more amenable East Timorese government, which in part owed its existence to the semi-permanent presence of substantial Australian military forces, must have been viewed with favour in Canberra.

\(^{189}\) Patrick Walters, ‘PM takes the helm in region,’ *The Australian*, 17 May 2006, p. 4.

Alkatiri himself has alleged that Australia may even have been directly involved in undermining his government.\textsuperscript{191} While this cannot be absolutely ruled out, there is no real evidence supporting these claims. Nonetheless, this does not absolve Australia of responsibility for Alkatiri’s downfall. Ostensibly, Australian troops were neutral in the conflict, mandated simply to disarm everyone in Dili, including East Timorese security forces who were now supposed to have returned to their barracks.\textsuperscript{192} But the situation in East Timor was not simply one of amorphous civil unrest, but rather of a political challenge to the Alkatiri regime. There appear to have been a number of groups and individuals, including Alfredo Reinado, who sought to inflame the initial split in the military by instigating violence between and among the police, military and civilian groups.\textsuperscript{193} These actions should be seen against the backdrop of several previous attempts to foment a military coup against the Alkatiri government. The precise links, if any, of these provocateurs to the army ‘petitioners’, to Gusmão and Ramos-Horta, or to other anti-Fretilin political forces, including the Catholic church, remain unclear.

The appearance of the Australian military could not but be an important factor in the resolution of this volatile situation. There are two main dynamics to consider. First, as Cleary argues, Australia’s early and very public military preparations from May 12\textsuperscript{th} might actually have precipitated further violence, by encouraging provocateurs who could now count on an intervention if they created enough chaos.\textsuperscript{194} Given their opposition to the political \textit{status quo}, such an intervention could only be to their advantage. It should be remembered that when Australia began these preparations, the situation in East Timor was serious, but by no means necessarily terminal for the government.

Second, the Australian intervention had the effect of freezing developments at the low point for the Alkatiri government. The insistence that Australian troops should be the sole security force, answerable only to Canberra, denied Alkatiri the

\textsuperscript{191} O’Shea and Martinkus, \textit{Transcript of Dateline: East Timor - downfall of a Prime Minister.}
\textsuperscript{192} Allard and Forbes, ‘Mission struggles to calm city.’; Dodd and Walters, ‘Troops take control in Dili - East Timor’s leaders Gusmao and Alkatiri at loggerheads.’
\textsuperscript{194} Cleary, \textit{Shakedown}, p. 251.
opportunity to reassert control of the situation, by mobilising either the sections of the army loyal to the government or Fretilin’s mass support base. Bereft of his main political assets, Alkatiri was reduced to one individual among many held responsible for the breakdown of security, giving moral weight to Gusmão’s (false) accusations of wrong doing. As such, the ‘neutrality’ of Australian forces could only be of benefit to those challenging Alkatiri.

The political impact of the military intervention was enhanced by Australia’s clear preference for Alkatiri’s removal, as the Howard government threw its weight behind Gusmão at key points of their struggle over state power. On May 26th, Howard signaled that he blamed Alkatiri for the crisis, commenting that

> There’s no point beating about the bush. The country has not been well governed and I do hope the sobering experience for those in elected positions of having to call in help from outside will induce the appropriate behaviour inside the country.\(^{195}\)

While Downer publicly warned that ‘forcing’ Alkatiri to resign would achieve nothing,\(^{196}\) Alkatiri himself later commented that ‘the only prime minister in the world that was really ‘advising me’… to step down, was the Prime Minister of Australia during… these difficult days.’\(^{197}\) In contrast, Gusmão’s move to strip Alkatiri of executive powers received Canberra’s blessing, with an official stating that ‘Gusmão has the ultimate authority. He’s the commander in chief of the defence and national security forces.’\(^{198}\) Gusmão again received support when his push to remove Alkatiri came to a head, Howard commenting that the President has been a galvanising leadership figure in the affairs of that country for a very long time… I find it very hard to believe that he won’t remain at the centre of political events.\(^{199}\)

---

\(^{195}\) Dodd and Walters, ‘Troops take control in Dili - East Timor’s leaders Gusmao and Alkatiri at loggerheads.’


\(^{197}\) O’Shea and Martinkus, Transcript of Dateline: East Timor - downfall of a Prime Minister.


Once the new government was in place, Howard quickly visited Dili to offer his support, but also to reiterate that he expected it to 'make the changes that are needed'.

There were some critical questions raised in the Australian media as to the internal political dimensions of the crisis and the legitimacy of Australia’s response, coming from a range of perspectives. Overall, however, these voices were swamped by a chorus of support for Australia’s actions. There was almost universal condemnation of the Alkatiri government for its supposed incompetence, authoritarianism and ‘Marxist’ ideology. This attitude was not limited to the political Right. Aarons, a long-time supporter of East Timorese independence, joined the denunciation of Alkatiri. Kingsbury dismissed claims that Australia was responsible for Alkatiri’s downfall, and argued that ‘the elevation of Ramos-Horta to Prime Minister was aimed not at overthrowing Alkatiri, who had already resigned, but towards installing a unifying political figure.’

Left-wing commentator Philip Adams was prompted by violence in both East Timor and the Solomon Islands at this time, not to question whether the interventionist policy was legitimate, but rather to worry that Australia might pull back into ‘isolationism’.

Foreign policy commentators at The Australian newspaper went so far as to openly embrace Australia’s role in removing Alkatiri, with Paul Kelly noting that the intervention transcends the domain of law and order and penetrates to East Timor’s political crisis… We are evolving as a regional power and discovering the risks and dividends in the exercise of that power. We have taken complete

---

200 Lindsay Murdoch, ‘Australia to cut forces in Timor,’ The Age, 19 July 2006, p. 3.
201 From Left-wing perspectives, see Helen Hill, ‘Stand up, the real Mr Alkatiri,’ The Age, 1 June 2006, p. 21; Maryann Keady, ‘A new cold war,’ New Matilda (online), 14 June, 2006; Martinkus, ‘A prime minister deposed, but at great cost to East Timor’s people.’ From more mainstream positions, see Dodd and Fitzpatrick, ‘Conspiracy theory haunts East Timor.’; Ross Peake, ‘Trooping into trouble,’ The Canberra Times, May 27 2006, p. B1; Hugh White, ‘We’ll need a lot of luck to beat the odds in East Timor,’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 30 May 2006, p. 11.
203 Mark Aarons, ‘Marxist leaders have failed East Timorese,’ The Australian, 29 May 2006, p. 12.
204 Damien Kingsbury, ‘Two cheers for the changes in East Timor,’ The Age, 11 July 2006, p. 11.
charge of law and order in East Timor and its domestic power struggle is conducted against the backdrop of our unstated pressure.\textsuperscript{206} He demanded that Australia not accept its interests being ‘marginalised any longer as they were ignored at the time of independence’ and ‘that as ultimate security guarantor, Australia must exert a greater authority.’\textsuperscript{207} His colleague Greg Sheridan likewise argued that

\begin{quote}
if Alkatiri remains Prime Minister of East Timor, this is a shocking indictment of Australian impotence. If you cannot translate the leverage of 1300 troops, 50 policemen, hundreds of support personnel, buckets of aid and a critical international rescue mission into enough influence to get rid of a disastrous Marxist Prime Minister, then you are just not very skilled in the arts of influence, tutelage, sponsorship and, ultimately, promoting the national interest.\textsuperscript{208}
\end{quote}

Such comments illuminate a difficulty in critically charting Australia’s position as a regional hegemon. Australia’s military and economic strength are obvious, but the ways and means in which these are translated into political power are harder to locate, veiled as they are by Canberra’s formal observance of its neighbours’ sovereignty. A further examination of this problem forms the basis of the thesis’s Conclusion.

\begin{notes}
\end{notes}
Conclusion

This Conclusion briefly restates the thesis’s core argument, and then returns to some of the broader issues raised in the Introduction and Chapter One, asking what the intervention reveals about Australia’s position in global international relations, and drawing out some political implications of the events of 1999.

This thesis has argued that Australia’s intervention in East Timor was an act of imperialism, serving its own strategic interests. The existence of a small, unviable state close to Australian territory has for decades been seen by Australian policy makers as a strategic threat, because of the possibility that it would come under the influence or control of one of Australia’s strategic rivals, notably China or Japan. This would threaten Australia’s lines of communication, or even serve as a base for attacks against the mainland. Indonesia’s occupation of East Timor precluded this possibility, and hence drew the support of successive Australian governments. Even in 1999 Australia would have preferred for the occupation to continue.

However, by September 1999 a simple maintenance of the status quo in East Timor was no longer possible. The Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998 undermined the stability of the Suharto regime, which was forced from power by a democracy movement demanding wide ranging reforms. The new Habibie government was also under pressure from the international community, on which it was financially dependant, to find a lasting solution to the situation in East Timor. Finally, the East Timorese independence movement was itself emboldened by the democratisation of Indonesia, and renewed its challenge to the military occupation. Although East Timor’s independence was never absolutely inevitable, over time the Indonesian state found that maintaining control over the territory was not worth the costs incurred.

This unpalatable reality was the central concern to which the Australian state had to respond in September 1999, and which ultimately prompted Australia’s military intervention. Two alternative explanations for the intervention have been advanced.
First, a left-populist position argues that the Australian government was forced to intervene in East Timor, against its own wishes, by a mass movement demanding action be taken. This overplays the strength of the movement demanding intervention. Moreover, Australia had for months been moving away from a policy of outright support for the occupation, adjusting to the reality that the Indonesian occupation was looking increasingly untenable. Preparations for the intervention itself actually began before the public campaign got underway.

Second, Australia’s intervention has been seen as motivated by self-evident humanitarian concerns. This explanation lacks *prima facie* credibility, given the history of Australia’s support for the Indonesian occupation. The intervention’s humanitarian achievements were limited. Indonesian forces had largely ceased killing East Timorese civilians by the time Australian troops arrived, and the impact Australian forces could have had was undermined by the overriding importance placed on establishing firm Australian control over the territory and avoiding clashes with Indonesian forces. Finally, the idea that Australia was prompted by humanitarian concerns is contradicted by the government’s later policy towards the new nation, which continued to put Australia’s own economic and strategic interests ahead of the needs of the East Timorese.

In contrast to these positions, this thesis has argued that the Australian intervention can be best explained as an effort to maintain regional stability. Australian troops did not forcibly displace the Indonesia military in East Timor, but rather moved into the vacuum left by the latter’s voluntary departure, providing a continuity of state control. The East Timorese independence movement could well have performed this function themselves, but not nearly as quickly or decisively as the Australian military. The intervention thus foreclosed the possibility of a weak, impoverished East Timorese state, unable to definitively control its own territory. Moreover, Canberra’s leading role in the military intervention ensured that Australia’s interests in East Timor could not be ignored by the United Nations as it managed the transition to full independence. East Timorese independence was not a welcome event for Australia, but the intervention allowed Canberra to manage the transition to independence in a way which did not challenge Australia’s most important strategic goals in the region. While this was clearly a departure from previous policy at one
level, there are therefore also deeper continuities with longstanding Australian strategic concerns.

Australia’s ‘empire of civil society’

One factor in the broad political support for Australia’s interventions in East Timor and subsequently the Southwest Pacific was the general acceptance of these actions as conforming with the norms of international law or, more broadly, good international citizenship.¹ This provided a public legitimacy lacking in relation to other more controversial policies, such as participation in the war in Iraq. Until September 1999, Australia argued that it was bound to respect Indonesia’s sovereignty over East Timor;² that the only mechanism it would accept as changing this situation was an internationally recognised ballot; and that it would not intervene militarily unless backed by a strong mandate from the United Nations (UN), and then only if Indonesia granted its permission.

Moreover, Australia scrupulously respects the formal sovereignty of its smaller neighbours. Despite achieving physical control over East Timor through its military power, in no sense did Australia establish a formal colony in the territory. The UN transferred sovereignty to an East Timorese government on May 20th 2002, and in September the new nation was admitted as the 191st member of the international body. Whatever criticisms might be leveled at Australia’s conduct in negotiating a new treaty on the Timor Sea resources, there was no question that oil and gas would be simply appropriated using extra-legal means.³ Australia’s subsequent interventions into the Southwest Pacific nations, and then again into East Timor, have all been conducted under legal agreements concluded with their various governments. Who within these countries might have the authority to conclude such agreements has at times been controversial, but the basic principle of formal sovereignty has been observed by Australia.

² Of course, Indonesia’s control over East Timor was not sanctioned by the majority of international legal opinion, and legal arguments could equally have been made in favour of breaching Indonesia’s sovereignty due to humanitarian considerations; the point though is that Australia was able to make a viable legal argument justifying its actions, and chose to do so.
³ While Australia rejected the judicial processes of the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea in this case, there is no question that this move was itself well within Australia’s rights.
All of this may seem to preclude the idea that Australia acts as an imperialist power in its immediate region. However, this would be to take at face value the external form of political interaction prevalent in the modern era, ignoring the more substantive power relations underlying these forms. Unique in human history, capitalist society is constructed on a formal separation of political-juridical power from economic power.\(^4\) This situation is complicated by the fact that capitalist states perform important economic functions, and have themselves come to be substantial employers of wage labour.\(^5\) Nonetheless, there is a fundamental break with earlier forms of social relations where economic and political power was necessarily combined in the person of, for example, landlords or slave owners. In contrast, the basic economic relationship under capitalism is that between capitalists and wage labourers, which does not involve an inherent political or legal hierarchy. Instead, at least under liberal democracy, all individual citizens possess equal legal and political rights; this formal equality, however, is constantly subverted by the very great substantive disparities in their economic power.

The form of inter-state relations under capitalism mirrors this situation.\(^6\) Because global capitalism is organised largely through the private workings of the market, the modern nation state appears to act internationally only on a political basis. Rosenberg has described the resulting international system as the ‘empire of civil society’, in which

the exercise of imperial power, like domestic social power, [has] two linked aspects: a public political aspect which concerns the management of the states-system, and a private political aspect which effects the extraction and relaying of surpluses.\(^7\)

Under this new form of empire, nation states interact on the basis of formal equality between sovereign powers, despite their massive inequalities in economic and consequently military power. The global wave of decolonisation following World War Two extended the system of formal political equality to the greater part of the


\(^5\) Indeed, under various forms of ‘state capitalism’, the government can come to be by far the largest employer.


\(^7\) Ibid., p. 131.
world’s territory, while leaving the economic dominance of the colonial powers largely unchanged.

Nor does the fact that legal diplomacy is the standard form of international relations mean that those relations are not fundamentally based on structural conflict.⁸ Again, the distinctive nature of inter-state conflict in the modern era arises from the separation of economic and political power. Harvey has pointed out that the process of capital accumulation is in itself indifferent to the political ‘ownership’ of the geographical space in which it takes place. Hence for capitalist economic power the world consists of ‘continuous space’.⁹ However, international space is also contested among political-military powers organised as territorially delimited states. In the modern era these two ‘territorial and capitalist logics of power’ are distinct, but at the same time ‘intertwine in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.’¹⁰ These contradictions are resolved through interstate competition in all its guises, that is, modern imperialism.

The resulting periodic outbreak of military conflict between nation states, however, does not represent a failure or breakdown of the rule of international law. Inherent in the concept of a legal agreement is the threat to use force to police any breaches of that agreement. Lacking any supra-national justice system, in the international sphere ‘between equal rights, force decides’.¹¹ Thus, in perpetuating the formal separation of economic and political power while leaving ample opportunity for major powers to enforce their ‘rights’, the international rule of law is not counterposed to imperialism, but rather constitutes one of its most important mechanisms.¹²

*Australia’s abhorrence of ‘continuous space’*

Australia finds itself thrust inexorably into this international system of sovereign nation states. Its cross border economic ties ensure that it must play by the rules of international diplomacy, law and trade which provide the essential underpinnings for global market transactions. Acceptance of these rules in no way implies an abnegation of Australian sovereignty; they are the form state sovereignty takes in the

---

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 29.
¹¹ Miéville cites Marx’s conception of rights in this regard, see Miéville, *Between equal rights*, p. 120.
¹² Ibid., pp. 289-293.
modern era. The important task in analysing Australia’s recent interventionist policy is not so much to uncover the ‘real’ aims of a policy justified on the grounds of legality, but rather to chart the concrete interests the Howard government sought to defend in the international sphere.

Australia has not, on the whole, seen the territory in its immediate vicinity as being a vitally important space for its own capital accumulation. But strategically, Australia cannot abide the existence of ‘continuous space’ in this area, unbounded by territorial control either by itself or by reliable strategic partners. Opened up to modern international competition by the commercial and then political expansion of European colonial powers, the Indonesian archipelago in particular has long been viewed as the potential launching point for an invasion of Australia, or as a chokepoint threatening lines of communication with vital military and economic partners. The response has been a long-term policy of strategic denial, in which friendly states have been encouraged as bulwarks against the penetration of rival powers in the region.

Australia’s economic and strategic power in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific is now well established, and no neighbouring nation has the strength to pose a direct military threat, including Indonesia. Australia is therefore concerned to preserve the regional status quo, against both internal and external disturbances. Regional ‘stability’ has over the decades come to be almost an end in itself for Australian policy makers. As such, strengthening regional legal and multilateral regimes is by and large in Australia’s interests.¹³ Likewise, Australia’s recent policy of regional intervention has not been one of territorial conquest, but has rather aimed at strengthening and stabilising local nation states, in order to increase their capacity to resist ‘outside’ interference.

The successful management of East Timor’s accession to independent statehood was the most significant example of this strategy. The victory of the independence movement confronted Canberra with a particularly stark instance of the problem of ‘continuous space’, as the nation-to-be lacked even nominal state institutions. If left to its own devices, the potential for East Timor to become a ‘weak’ or ‘failed’ state on Australia’s doorstep was all too real. Inevitably, one major power or another

---

¹³ On the use of ‘international law’ as an ‘ideology of the status quo’, see Morgenthau, Politics among nations, pp. 86-88.
would have moved to assert its influence in the territory. Instability in East Timor might also have proved contagious, further destabilising the ‘arc’ of islands to Australia’s north. An uncontrolled transition to independence would have undermined Australia’s decades old strategic policy in the Indonesian archipelago. The Howard government therefore responded by decisively filling the threatening space with its own military forces. This success, however, was neither absolute nor permanent, given the ongoing potential for rival powers to intrude in the new nation. Potential recourse to military power underpins Australia’s policy throughout the whole region. Despite its concern to observe the formal sovereignty of its small neighbours, Australia simultaneously reserves to itself the right to substantial intervention in the domestic affairs of those same nations, justified through the ideologies of ‘good governance’ and ‘economic rationalism’. These supposedly ‘non-political’ policies occlude the legacy of Australia’s status as a colonial power, which continues to underpin its regional dominance. Moreover, Australia is only able to pursue its regional ambitions because of its current economic and military strength, and that of its superpower ally the United States. Although Canberra’s recent interventionist policy has not been prompted by direct commercial concerns, Australia’s economic dominance provided crucial leverage in securing local cooperation for intervention in the Pacific nations. When financial incentives have not been sufficient, Australia has been quick to make use of its ability to deploy rapidly overwhelming military force to maintain its position.

**Change and continuity in Australian relations with East Timor**

A major concern of this thesis has been to evaluate the causes and significance of change in Australia’s policy towards East Timor. Most commentators have focused on the dramatic outward change in Australia’s stance towards the territory, from strident opponent to guarantor of East Timorese independence, whatever their assessment of the origins or desirability of this change.

In contrast, the arguments presented here have been more concerned to trace the substantive continuities in Australia’s strategy in the Indonesian archipelago, which has for decades aimed at maintaining regional stability and preventing the creation of weak neighbouring states. This underlying strategic goal has been pursued by Australia in a remarkably flexible fashion since World War Two. Within this
historical context, East Timor’s independence likewise forced Australia to adapt its position towards the territory, while not abandoning its fundamental strategic priorities. Support for the Indonesian occupation was replaced with a policy of managing the emergence of an East Timorese state such that it would not threaten Australia’s interests.

The changing manner in which Australia has sought to preserve regional stability is obviously not without its own significance. Indonesia’s occupation was in many ways a form of political control which harked back to pre-World War Two colonialism, which increasingly seemed outmoded and inefficient in the age of global free market capitalism. Likewise, Australia’s support for the Suharto dictatorship was very much a product of the Cold War. As such, the Indonesian-Australian accord on East Timor was undermined from a variety of directions throughout the 1990s. East Timor’s independence placed Australia’s regional relations on a more sustainable basis.

This adjustment of the regional order, however, was not driven by an innate progression towards a predetermined liberal ‘end of history’. Nor was it a triumph of morality freed from Cold War realpolitik. In fact, Australia would have overwhelmingly preferred that the status quo of Indonesian dominance was maintained. The real motive force for change in Australia’s policy was the very concrete struggles of the Indonesian and East Timorese people against the Suharto dictatorship. This popular domestic opposition, classically considered outside the bounds of international relations scholarship, made Indonesia’s ongoing occupation of East Timor simply untenable. While not unaware of the difficulties caused by relying on the Suharto dictatorship for regional stability, neither Canberra nor Washington were willing to risk forcing his removal, until the decision was effectively taken out of their hands.

Cox has written that fundamental to a critical approach to international relations is the recognition that profound changes in the prevailing world order are both possible and desirable.14 The democratic upheaval in Indonesia was undoubtedly an example of the kind of development to which Cox points. But it is also important to recognise the limits to the international impact of this democratisation process. Popular opinion

---

in Australia responded favourably to the upheavals leading to East Timor’s independence. But this turmoil in no way affected the basic configurations of political power within Australia itself. As a result, the Howard government worked consistently throughout 1998 and 1999 to limit the realignment in Australia’s northern approaches to the barest possible minimum. Initially, this meant advocating that East Timor remain an autonomous part of Indonesia, rather than gaining full independence. When this became impossible, the goal shifted to the creation of a relatively stable East Timorese state, which had a basically friendly orientation towards Australia and the United States.

This policy was largely successful. This is not to deny the importance for the East Timorese people of gaining their national independence. Their achievement has been tempered, however, by East Timor’s continued lowly status within the global economic and political pecking order. Australia, in contrast, increased its standing by taking on a new role as a hegemonic power in East Timor. Its wider position as a regional power was also greatly enhanced by the 1999 military deployment. Many long-term critics of Australian foreign policy hoped that the intervention in East Timor represented a turn to a more ethical stance in the international sphere. While understandable, this hope was misplaced.

Nor, at the time of writing, is it clear what might be the exact source of a more profound reorientation in Australian foreign policy in the future. While the Howard government was voted from office in 2007, the Rudd Labor government largely embraced its predecessor’s regional policies. In February 2008 the government rapidly boosted the number of Australian troops and police operating in East Timor in response to the shooting of President José Ramos-Horta by rebellious East Timorese soldiers. In his first year in office, Rudd also signaled further increases in defence spending in an attempt to preserve Australia’s preeminent regional military position.

Such continuities, however, may be interrupted by an ongoing, major economic crisis, which in the longer term has the potential to weaken the United States’

---

position as the world’s dominant power, a development which would force a rethink of Australia’s strategic position. This is precisely the kind of economic problem which this thesis has identified as ultimately responsible for imperialism, and the upheaval in the world order will likely lead to more rather than less international conflict. But such economic and political ruptures can also result in dramatic and previously ‘impossible’ political developments, East Timor’s independence being a case in point. No matter how longstanding and firmly entrenched, Australian imperialism in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific is not immune to such reversals.
Bibliography

Journal articles and papers published by academic institutions


Anderson, Tim. ‘Aid, trade and oil: Australia’s second betrayal of East Timor.’


———. ‘Self-determination after independence: East Timor and the World Bank.’


‘PNG in need for much more than just money.’ Executive Highlights no. 103, The Centre for Independent Studies, 2002.


Lowry, Bob. ‘Australia-Indonesia security cooperation: For better or worse?’

MacCallum, Mungo. ‘Girt by sea: Australia, the refugees and the politics of fear.’


Martinkus, John. ‘Paradise betrayed: West Papua’s struggle for independence.’


Pitts, Maxine. ‘Crime and corruption - does Papua New Guinea have the capacity to control it?’ *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 16, no. 2 (2001): 127-134.


Simpson, Paul. ‘Illegally and beautifully’: The United States, the Indonesian invasion of East Timor and the international community, 1974-76.’ *Cold War History* 5, no. 3 (2003): 281-315.


Books, chapters in edited books and PhD theses


*Expanding horizons: Australia and Indonesia into the 21st century.* Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1994.


Dobell, Graeme. ‘Australia’s intervention policy: A Melanesian learning curve?’ In *Intervention and state-building in the Pacific: The legitimacy of ‘cooperative...*


Pietsch, Sam. ‘To have and to hold on to: Wealth, power and the capitalist class.’ In *Class and struggle in Australia*, edited by Rick Kuhn, 21-38. Sydney: Pearson Educational Australia, 2005.


van Klinken, Helene. ‘Taking the risk, paying the price: East Timorese vote in Ermera district.’ In *Guns and ballot boxes: East Timor’s vote for*


**Newspapers and magazines consulted**

*The Adelaide Advertiser*
*The Age*
*The Australian*
*The Australian Financial Review*
*The Bulletin*
*The Canberra Times*
*The Courier-Mail*
*The Daily Telegraph*
*The Economist*
*Far Eastern Economic Review*
*Green Left Weekly*
*The Guardian*
*The Herald*
*Herald Sun*
*International Herald Tribune*
*The Jakarta Post*
*Kompas*
*Merdeka*
*The New York Times*
*Northern Territory News*
*Republika*
*Reuters News*
*Socialist Alternative*
*Suara Timor Timur*
*The Sydney Morning herald*
*Tempo*
The Washington Post
The West Australian

Primary source documents


Background paper for the Timor-Leste and development partners meeting. World Bank, 3-4 April, 2006.

Background paper prepared for the information meeting on East Timor. World Bank, 29 September, 1999.


Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste: 2005 Article IV consultation - Staff report.
International Monetary Fund, Country Report no. 05/245, 2005.


‘Document 65, Letter from Willesee to Whitlam, 10 December 1974.’ In Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the Incorporation of Portuguese


‘Document 231, Commonwealth Government to Addison, 3 September 1945.’ In Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-49: Volume VIII: 1945, edited


Global economic prospects and the developing countries. World Bank, September, 1997.


Political savingram no. 53 from Australian Embassy Jakarta.

Political savingram no. 59 from Australian Embassy Jakarta.


World Bank country assistance strategy for Timor-Leste FY 06-08. World Bank, no. 32700-TP, 2005.


**Online sources**

5352.0 - *International investment position, Australia: Supplementary statistics, 2007.*


Aid activities in East Timor. AusAID, 2006 (accessed 02.06.2006, 

E Timor considers call for help. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 24.05.2006 
(accessed 22.09.2008, 

East Timor - Country brief. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (accessed 

Extract from the current House Hansard. Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 

Free Trade Agreements. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (accessed 

Gusmao’s resignation threat ‘hard to believe’. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 
23.06.2006 (accessed 22.09.2008, 

IMF statement to Interim Donors’ Meeting on Timor-Leste. International Monetary 


International financial statistics. International Monetary Fund, May 2007 (accessed 
09.05.07, http://www.imf.org/external/data.htm).

Japan-Australia joint declaration on security cooperation. Japanese Ministry of 
Foreign Affairs, 17.03.2007 (accessed 12.05.2008, 

Joint agreement on enhanced cooperation between Australia and Papua New 
Guinea. Australasian Legal Information Institute, 20.06.2004 (accessed 

Joint declaration on comprehensive partnership between Australia and the Republic 
of Indonesia. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 04.04.2005 (accessed 
06.05.2008, 


Speech by the Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri, at the opening session of the Timor-Leste development partners meeting. Timor-Leste Office of the Prime Minister, 04.04.2006 (accessed 06.07.2007, http://www.pm.gov.tp/speech4april.htm).


**Personal interviews**

Anonymous. An NGO worker in East Timor. 08.11.2007, Dili.


Budi, Setyo. Indonesian social activist working in East Timor. 08.11.2007, Dili.

Caturani, Dhyta, and Reiner. Indonesian student activists and former members of the PRD. 14.02.2007, Jakarta.


de Oliveira, José Luis. East Timorese NGO worker with Yayasan Hak. 23.11.2007, Dili.

Farid, Hilmar. Indonesian political activist and NGO worker in East Timor. 08.02.2007, Jakarta.

Fonseca, Joaquim. Former student activist and NGO worker in East Timor. 22.11.2007, Dili.

Freitas, Tomas. East Timorese political activist and NGO worker with Luta Hamutuk. 13.11.2007, Dili.


Margiyono, Meggy. Indonesian political activist and former member of the PRD. 05.02.2007, Jakarta.


Rodriguez, Nuno. East Timorese political activist and NGO worker with the Sahe Institute. 10.11.2007, Dili.

Soares, Zito. Leader of East Timorese pro-autonomy student group. 22.02.2007, Jogjakarta.

Surjawo. Indonesian NGO worker active in East Timor. 20.02.2007, Jogjakarta.

Teixeira, José. Member of the East Timorese parliament and former minister in the Alkatiri Government. 21.11.2007, Dili.


Wilson. Indonesian political activist and former member of the PRD. 13.02.07, Jakarta.