Australia’s military intervention in East Timor, 1999

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February 2009

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian National University
I declare that the material contained in this thesis is entirely my own work, except where due and accurate acknowledgement of another source has been made.

Samuel Pietsch
Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have been completed without the generous assistance of a number of people. My supervisory panel of Dr Rick Kuhn, Dr Katrina Lee-Koo and especially my principal supervisor Dr John Minns provided me with invaluable advice and guidance throughout the project. Many people gave freely of their time to participate in my research interviews; most are named in the footnotes although some preferred to remain anonymous. In undertaking this fieldwork I was greatly assisted by Tom O’Lincoln, Stephen Miller, Dr Jennifer Drysdale, Eric Hiariej and Setyo Budi. While writing the thesis I had the opportunity to study the Indonesian language; my thanks to the staff of the ANU’s Faculty of Asian Studies and of Satya Wacana Christian University, Salatiga, in particular Dr George Quinn and Pak Urip Sutiyono. I have greatly benefited from the opportunity to discuss my ideas in a variety of forums with the staff and undergraduate and postgraduate students of the School of Social Sciences. The very efficient staff in the School’s office reduced administrative difficulties to the barest minimum. Leon Pietsch proofread the manuscript at unreasonably short notice.

On a more personal note, my thanks to Jesse, Amrita, Sarah, Miranda, Siaan, Rachel and Elinor for their friendship and support. As always, by parents have been an inexhaustible source of practical assistance, sound advice and encouragement. My partner Emma has had the unenviable task of living with a PhD student for the past four years. Her patience, understanding and unstinting support have been remarkable, and all the more so because I am sure I have never adequately expressed my gratitude. Lochlain’s arrival delayed rather than assisted the completion of the thesis, but he has also proved more of an inspiration than I could possibly have imagined.

My greatest debt, however, is one all too easily forgotten: that incurred by a researcher to those they write about. Without the determination of ordinary people to strive for a better life, and a better future for their children, the work of academics would have little meaning. The current piece of research would obviously never have come about without the courage and sacrifices of the East Timorese who fought for their independence, and the efforts of those in Indonesia and Australia who assisted them. Accordingly, I would like to dedicate this thesis to all those who struggled for freedom in East Timor, and to those who continue to do so.
Abstract

This thesis argues that the Australian military intervention in East Timor in 1999 was motivated primarily by the need to defend Australia’s own strategic interests. It was an act of Australian imperialism understood from a Marxist perspective, and was consistent with longstanding strategic policy in the region.

Australian policy makers have long been concerned about the security threat posed by a small and weak neighbouring state in the territory of East Timor. This led to the deployment of Australian troops to the territory in World War Two. In 1974 Australia supported Indonesia’s invasion of the territory in order to prevent it from becoming a strategic liability in the context of Cold War geopolitics. But, as an indirect result of the Asian financial crisis, by September 1999 the Indonesian government’s control over the territory had become untenable. Indonesia’s political upheaval also raised the spectre of the ‘Balkanisation’ of the Indonesian archipelago, and East Timor thus became the focal point for Australian fears about an ‘arc of instability’ that arose in this period.

Australia’s insertion of military forces into East Timor in 1999 served its own strategic priorities by ensuring an orderly transfer of sovereignty took place, avoiding a destabilising power vacuum as the country transitioned to independence. It also guaranteed that Australia’s economic and strategic interests in the new nation could not be ignored by the United Nations or the East Timorese themselves. There are therefore underlying consistencies in Australia’s policy on East Timor stretching back several decades. Despite changing contexts, and hence radically different policy responses, Australia acted throughout this time to prevent political and strategic instability in East Timor.

In addition, the intervention reinforced Australia’s standing as a major power in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific. The 1999 deployment therefore helped facilitate a string of subsequent Australian interventions in Pacific island nations, both by providing a model for action and by building a public consensus in favour of the use of military intervention as a policy tool.
This interpretation of events challenges the consensus among existing academic accounts. Australia’s support of Indonesia’s invasion and occupation of East Timor from 1974 was frequently criticised as favouring realpolitik over ethical considerations. But the 1999 intervention, which ostensibly ended severe violence and secured national independence for the territory, drew widespread support, both from the public and academic commentators. It has generally been seen as a break with previous Australian policy, and as driven by political forces outside the normal foreign policy process. Moreover, it has been almost universally regarded as a triumph for moral conduct in international affairs, and even as a redemptive moment for the Australian national conscience. Viewing the intervention as part of the longstanding strategy of Australian imperialism casts doubt on such positive evaluations.
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Abbreviations

Apodeti Timorese Popular Democratic Association
ABRI Indonesian Armed Forces and Police, TNI after April 1999
ADB Asian Development Bank
AMS Agreement on Maintaining Security
ANU Australian National University
ANZUS Australia New Zealand United States treaty
APEC Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
ARF also ASEAN-RF, ASEAN Regional Forum
ASDT Timorese Social Democratic Association
ASEAN Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASPI Australian Strategic Policy Institute
AUSTFA Australian United States Free Trade Agreement
Brimob Mobile Brigade, Indonesian paramilitary police
CEP Community Empowerment Project
CIA Central Intelligence Agency
CNRM National Council of Maubere Resistance, CNRT after April 1998
CNRT National Council of Timorese Resistance, previously CNRM
CPA Communist Party of Australia
CIS Centre for Independent Studies
CSIS Centre for Strategic and International Studies
DEA Department of External Affairs
DFA Department of Foreign Affairs
DFAT Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>ECP</td>
<td>Enhanced Cooperation Package</td>
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<tr>
<td>EEC</td>
<td>European Economic Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETSSC</td>
<td>East Timor Student Solidarity Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falintil</td>
<td>also FALINTIL, Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-FDTL</td>
<td>also Falintil-FDTL, East Timor Defence Forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fretilin</td>
<td>also FRETLIN, Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor</td>
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<tr>
<td>FTA</td>
<td>Free Trade Agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>GAM</td>
<td>Free Aceh Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>GST</td>
<td>Goods and Services Tax</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFIs</td>
<td>International Financial Institutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interfet</td>
<td>also INTERFET or InterFET, International Force for East Timor</td>
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<tr>
<td>JPDA</td>
<td>Joint Petroleum Development Area</td>
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<tr>
<td>MPR</td>
<td>People’s Consultative Assembly</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCBA</td>
<td>National Cooperative Business Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEI</td>
<td>Netherlands East Indies</td>
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<tr>
<td>NICs</td>
<td>Newly Industrialised Countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Government Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSC</td>
<td>National Security Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAN</td>
<td>National Mandate Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>PDI</td>
<td>Indonesian Democratic Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>PDI-P</td>
<td>Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIF</td>
<td>Pacific Islands Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PKF</td>
<td>Peace Keeping Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PKI</td>
<td>Indonesian Communist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNG</td>
<td>Papua New Guinea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polri</td>
<td>Indonesian Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRD</td>
<td>People’s Democratic Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAMSI</td>
<td>Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEATO</td>
<td>Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TNI</td>
<td>Indonesian Armed Forces, previously ABRI</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
x

UDT  Timorese Democratic Union
UN  United Nations
UNAMET  United Nations Mission in East Timor
UNMISET  United Nations Mission of Support to East Timor
UNOTIL  United Nations Office in Timor-Leste
UNTAET  United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor
WTO  World Trade Organisation
WWF  Waterside Workers Federation

US$  United States dollars
A$  Australian dollars
Rp  Indonesian rupiahs

Note on proper nouns

The territory which now makes up the nation of the República Democrática de Timor-Leste has been known over time by a variety of names in a variety of languages. For simplicity, it is referred to throughout this thesis by its common English name of ‘East Timor’, unless particular reference is being made to another usage. The names of Indonesian people and places have been spelt according to current norms. In no case, however, have direct quotations from other authors been modified to make them consistent with the text of the thesis.