
The Road to INTERFET: Bringing the Politics Back In

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This article examines Australia's strategic policy during the 1999 East Timor crisis. Written as a stand-alone piece, it is in some ways a broad counter-point to the essay by Professor Hugh White in the Autumn 2008 issue of *Security Challenges*.¹ The author, who was Principal Analyst (East Timor) for the Australian Intelligence Corps in 1998 and 1999, argues that the Australian government was not ambivalent about a peacekeeping force; rather, it worked assiduously to prevent such a force. It demonstrates the need for strategic actors to incorporate the rough-and-tumble of domestic politics and public opinion into their sometimes bureaucratic, anaemic calculations.

The Status Quo

In August 1997, the then Deputy Secretary for Strategy in the Department of Defence, Hugh White, was putting the finishing touches to the Defence Strategic Review (*Australia's Strategic Policy*).² Published just months before the Indonesian economic crisis, the document said:

Within the next 20 years, Indonesia's economy will likely become the biggest in our closer region. Indonesia's gross national product will likely overtake Australia's in that same period, as will its defence budget... President Suharto ... has strengthened Indonesia's cohesion and prosperity.³

Shortly afterwards, Suharto was forced out of office, Indonesia's economy was in tatters, and its cohesion came under severe threat in Aceh, West Papua and East Timor. At the time, however, Australian policy towards Indonesia was operating within a long-established bi-partisan framework; the Howard government maintained its predecessor's support of the Suharto regime and of Indonesian rule over East Timor. When the regime cracked down on pro-democracy demonstrators in July 1996, there had been no official expressions of criticism or even disapproval from the new Foreign

¹ Hugh White, 'The Road to INTERFET: Reflections on Australian Strategic Decisions Concerning East Timor, December 1998-September 1999', *Security Challenges*, vol. 4 no. 1 (Autumn 2008), pp. 69-87.

² J. Lyons, 'Operation Backflip', *The Bulletin*, 3 August 1999, pp. 20-25.

³ Department of Defence, *Australia's Strategic Policy* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1997), pp. 10-11. The document also assessed that "In the short term ... it is unlikely that either India or Pakistan ... will have a major impact on the East Asian security environment." Soon after this assessment both India and Pakistan went nuclear, and then fought each other ferociously over Kargil in Kashmir.

Minister. Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer said that Suharto was “perhaps the world’s greatest figure in the latter half of the 20th century.”⁴

Fracturing the Bipartisan Consensus

However, a hugely significant event had occurred in 1997: the Australian Labor Party’s spokesperson on foreign relations, Laurie Brereton, had fractured the long-standing bipartisan consensus towards Indonesian rule over East Timor, calling for the first time for a “right of self-determination.”⁵ This was, he argued, the only real solution to the problem of East Timor.

The bi-partisanship that had been an enduring feature of Australia’s position on East Timor had allowed successive governments to contain the problem of public opinion. By maintaining bi-partisanship, parliamentary oppositions provided governments with a margin of comfort necessary to neutralise public opinion. By the time Howard had come to power, no foreign minister or shadow foreign minister had visited East Timor in more than twenty years. Brereton’s move opened up political space that had previously been closed to civil society groups that campaigned for democracy in Indonesia and self-determination for East Timor. The constant pressure he would apply in Parliament and in the media meant that the government would have no comfort zone. Particularly in 1999, it was always on the back foot, forced to defend its stance to an increasingly agitated public. Brereton first took the new policy to the NSW State Party Foreign Affairs Committee. Following its adoption by Labor’s NSW Conference in October 1997, Brereton took the policy to Labor’s National Security and Trade Policy Committee, which adopted it unaltered. The Labor Party’s proposed platform with the new language was released publicly in November 1997.

Thus, in the lead-up to the 3 October 1998 federal election, there was a clear policy difference between the government and the opposition on the question of self-determination for East Timor. Brereton had also promised that Labor would, if elected, appoint “a Special Envoy on East Timor who will work closely with the United Nations and all the parties involved.”⁶ Since the election was fought primarily over domestic economic policies such as the Goods and Services Tax, the East Timor question did not become a priority during the campaign. However, the existence of a policy difference between the two parties forced the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) to consider the independence of East Timor as part of the caretaker conventions. These conventions are a long-standing feature of Australian Public Service procedure: they reflect the principle that, with the dissolution of the House, the Executive cannot be held accountable for its decisions in

⁴ D. Lague, ‘The looming crisis with Jakarta’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 August 1996, p. 15.

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

⁶ L. Brereton, *Human Rights and Foreign Aid: Speech to the 1998 ACFOA/CAA Federal Election Forum*, Maughan Church, Adelaide, 28 September 1998.

the normal manner, and that every general election carries the possibility of a change of government. Under the caretaker conventions, DFAT (like all other departments) is required to prepare incoming government briefs for the opposition as well as the government. These briefs are prepared on the basis of the stated intentions of the parties prior to the election. They canvass the range of issues involved in the implementation of these intentions. The incoming government brief prepared in the event of a Labor victory canvassed Labor's support for self-determination for East Timor.

The brief was in fact written to dissuade Labor from pushing for self-determination.⁷ Still, the act of preparing the incoming government brief meant that DFAT was forced for the very first time to think systematically about the implications of East Timorese independence. As election night wore on, it became clear that Labor was not going to win even though it had won a majority of votes. Brereton and his adviser, the historian Dr Philip Dorling, resolved to exert maximum pressure on the government in support of East Timorese self-determination. They would be assisted in their efforts by support from a re-energised network of solidarity activists, which had sensed that a decisive victory to the long struggle was finally in sight. Accordingly, Brereton's first initiative after the election was to call for a permanent international presence to monitor military activity in East Timor:

Real progress toward a lasting East Timor settlement is unlikely to be achieved amidst allegations of clandestine military action and arming of para-military squads. Establishment of an independent and effective international monitoring presence in East Timor would allow dialogue and negotiation to proceed in an environment characterised by transparency, improved confidence and trust.⁸

This was the first time a major national figure with real political clout and a platform to air his views had called for international monitors.

A Historic Policy Shift?

Also in October 1998, another development unnerved the Indonesian and Australian foreign policy establishments. Indonesia's new president, B.J. Habibie, had previously announced that many combat troops would be withdrawn from East Timor. Alexander Downer praised this decision, calling it "a step in the right direction."⁹ However, Dr Andrew McNaughtan, a Sydney-based activist, smuggled out the entire Indonesian army personnel records for East Timor. The documents showed that Indonesia was merely rotating combat personnel, not withdrawing them, and that its claims of demilitarisation in East Timor were false. McNaughtan and his fellow activists maximised publicity by holding simultaneous press conferences in different cities around the world. The exposure of the personnel records led

⁷ The content of the brief is confidential, as is the identity of my source.

⁸ L. Brereton, Statement to the Press, Parliament House, Canberra, 30 October 1998.

⁹ I. Stewart, 'Downer hails Timor troop withdrawal', *The Australian*, 28 July 1998.

to a dramatic increase in the pressure on Habibie and the Indonesian foreign policy apparatus. Activists had previously filmed and then smuggled out the footage of the Santa Cruz massacre, had lobbied successfully for the Nobel Peace Prize for East Timorese figures, and conducted numerous other actions in support of their cause. These actions resulted in turning points on the road to INTERFET, although they escape the analytical lenses of most strategists.

Downer tried to downplay the issue, saying he was “attempting to verify the authenticity of the documents”.¹⁰ His statement was part of a consistent policy of preserving Indonesian rule over East Timor. When Habibie had previously offered “special autonomy” as a way of preventing a referendum on self-determination, Downer had also dismissed calls for a referendum, saying that East Timor was “obviously a very divided place. There is no point trying to solve the issue with a quick fix.”¹¹ In a visit to the Philippines for annual talks between ASEAN and its chief partners, Downer re-affirmed his government’s position, “I do not think that immediately moving into some sort of active self-determination in East Timor is a solution at all.”¹²

Meanwhile, the economic situation in Indonesia was plunging to new depths. In the second quarter of 1998, real GDP was 16.5% below the same period in 1997. The exchange rate was at 11,000 Indonesian rupiah to one US dollar, more than four times lower than the previous year. Inflation was skyrocketing, the price of food was soaring and the purchasing power of the rupiah was plummeting. Wage-earners had lost more than a third of their real incomes. Domestic unrest was threatening to get out of control. Oil prices—a key source of government revenues—were stagnating at \$10-12 per barrel. In the midst of all this, Indonesia’s foreign policy apparatus was proving unable to argue effectively for economic assistance because it was confronted constantly by questions about East Timor. It was a problem the new government did not need. As Hugh White points out, Howard’s letter to Habibie reflected his government’s support for Indonesian rule over East Timor.¹³ The government too conceded this at the time, even if it now tries to hint at the opposite. As Senator Robert Hill put it, there had been no shift in policy:

The Prime Minister has come to the conclusion that ... an autonomous East Timor within Indonesia, at least for the time being, would be the better option.¹⁴

¹⁰ P. Daley, ‘Fear over troops switch on Timor’, *The Age*, 31 October 1998.

¹¹ L. Williams, ‘Military Ties Help, Downer Insists’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July 1998.

¹² G. Green, ‘Freedom Hopes Mount’, *The Age*, 13 January 1999; ‘Warning against quick-fix for E. Timor’, *Courier Mail*, 29 July 1998.

¹³ Hugh White, ‘The Road to INTERFET: Reflections on Australian Strategic Decisions Concerning East Timor, December 1998-September 1999’, p. 72.

¹⁴ R. Hill, *Committee Hansard*, Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 11 February 1999, p. 205.

The Deputy Secretary of DFAT explained later that

a very important part of our thinking at the time that the Prime Minister dispatched his letter was that Indonesia had only one last chance to keep East Timor as part of Indonesia.¹⁵

Howard's letter was therefore an attempt to make the best of this "one last chance" for the Indonesian military to contain the forces of East Timorese independence.

Within the new Indonesian cabinet, many ministers were technocrats who had played no part in the decision to invade East Timor. They did not wish to bear the burden of a policy for which they were not responsible, with which they did not agree, and from which they derived no benefit. Habibie himself had been a technocrat in Indonesia's industrial system. He had never invested much political capital in the politics of the occupation, which was a heavily infantry-based, low-tech affair. His close ideological ally was Adi Sasono, the minister for cooperatives. Like Habibie, Sasono was an engineer by training; also like Habibie, he had been secretary-general of the modernist Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals. Sasono had supported a referendum in East Timor for many years, and had informed Habibie of this many times. Another Habibie adviser, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, was similarly opposed to the retention of East Timor. She had publicly expressed criticism of the annexation, and had become irritated at the frequent questions she was facing at international meetings and press conferences, where she was forced to defend a policy she did not support. Ginandjar Kartasasmita, the Coordinating Minister for the Economy, also took the view that East Timor should be given the right to self-determination.

When Habibie told the Australian Ambassador to Jakarta, John McCarthy, that he was going to move very quickly on East Timor rather than postpone it as Howard had proposed, the Australian government moved into opinion-management mode. A senior Australian diplomat in the Jakarta embassy was instructed to leak the letter to an Australian newspaper reporter based in Jakarta.¹⁶ Alexander Downer then called a press conference to announce what he called an "historic policy shift."

The Counter-reaction

There was another faction in the Indonesian cabinet, however: senior military personnel who were opposed to an independent East Timor such as Major General Sintong Panjaitan, who had been relieved of his command following the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre, and Lieutenant General Feisal Tanjung, the Coordinating Minister for Politics and Security. Panjaitan and Tanjung had

¹⁵ J. Dauth, *Committee Hansard*, Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 9 December 1999, p. 1028.

¹⁶ Confidential interview.

both been members of the military team that had manipulated the so-called Act of Free Choice in West Papua in 1969. Tanjung's assessment was that a similar result could be engineered in East Timor. After all, the vote in East Timor for the ruling party (Golkar) had always been higher than the national average in previous elections.¹⁷ In his official biography, Feisal Tanjung later said that the military estimated that about 75% of East Timorese would vote in favour of integration.¹⁸ Major General Zacky Anwar Makarim, later identified as a key suspect by Indonesia's Human Rights Commission, said that at the time they had never expected to lose by such a huge margin.¹⁹ Foreign Minister Ali Alatas also said that most members of the Indonesian cabinet "were then very convinced we would win the referendum. Everything was painted with optimism."²⁰

The problem for them was that the voting process in the East Timor referendum would be qualitatively different; it enfranchised all adults, not just a select group of representatives. Furthermore, there would be an unprecedented level of international scrutiny; the UN's presence involved personnel from over seventy countries comprising approximately 500 UN volunteers, 271 administrative and support staff, 275 police, fifty military liaison officers, twenty-eight professional staff, sixteen security officers, fifteen political officers and nine public information officers. There were also approximately 600 journalists and 100 official Portuguese and Indonesian observers. Nearly 2300 international observers also converged on East Timor, to say nothing of the 1700 Indonesian and East Timorese non-governmental observers.²¹ It would be impossible to engineer a repeat of the fraudulent 1969 Act of Free Choice, in which 1022 West Papuans out of a total population of 700,000 were coerced into joining the Indonesian republic.

A Campaign to Prevent Peacekeepers

Dewi Fortuna Anwar sounded a public warning about the Indonesian military's forthcoming campaign of militia-backed terror. Writing in the *International Herald Tribune*, she said that "Indonesia's 500,000 strong military cannot be relied on to do the job [of providing security for the ballot] because it is not regarded as neutral."²² Alarmed, the US Assistant Secretary of State Stanley Roth met the Secretary of Australia's DFAT, Ashton Calvert five days later in Washington DC. According to the highly sensitive transcript of the conversation, Roth was of the view that

¹⁷ For example, in 1987 Golkar won 73.1% nationally but 93.6% in East Timor. In 1992, Golkar won 68% nationally but 82.6% in East Timor.

¹⁸ Usamah Hisyam, *Feisal Tanjung: Terbaik untuk rakyat, terbaik bagi Abri* (Jakarta: Dharmapena, 1999), pp. 219-232, 724, 738.

¹⁹ *South China Morning Post*, 5 January 2000.

²⁰ 'Santa Cruz incident a turning point in our diplomacy', *Tempo*, 18-24 September 2000.

²¹ Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation, *Chega!*, Vol 3, CAVR 2005, p. 136.

²² D.F. Anwar, *International Herald Tribune*, 17 February 1999.

a full-scale peacekeeping operation would be an unavoidable aspect of the transition... Australia's position of keeping peace keeping at arms length was essentially defeatist, and that it was necessary to go forth and persuade Congress and UN member states that it simply had to be done.²³

Stating the Australian government's position, however, Calvert made it clear that Australia wouldn't support peacekeepers. It is important to understand that the transcript of the Calvert-Roth meeting was leaked to the media soon after. Had it not leaked, the Australian public would not have found out about the government's secret rejection of Roth's proposal until 2029, when the archives open up under the thirty-year rule. By contrast, the real-time leak resulted in a swift escalation of political pressure.

Alexander Downer continued to publicly reject the need for peacekeepers. Emerging from a meeting with the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, he said:

We hope that there won't be a need for a peacekeeping force because if you need a peacekeeping force, you need a peace to keep and peace first has to be negotiated and we hope that when the peace is negotiated it will be a peaceful peace that won't require a peacekeeping force.²⁴

The Liquiça massacre occurred three weeks later. The circumstances of this massacre were unambiguous: on 6 April 1999, a number of militia went to Liquiça village accompanied by army and police. They surrounded a church where villagers were sheltering, dragged two priests out of the church compound and took them to the local military district headquarters. Once the priests were removed, Indonesian troops began to throw tear gas into the church. When the refugees ran out, blinded and trying to save themselves, the militia rushed towards them. Women and children were attacked with fists, sticks, rifle butts, stones, arrows and machetes. More than fifty people died and seven were injured during this attack. Afterwards, the militia forced the local people to hoist the Indonesian national flag.²⁵

The Australian government moved into damage control mode. Commenting on the massacre, Downer said:

Well, look, they [the Indonesian military] were present, I understand, at the incident but there again, there's a debate about what part they played. They clearly didn't themselves kill people, but there is an argument, about whether they did try to stop the fighting or they didn't do enough to try to stop the fighting, and the trouble is it's very hard given we ourselves had no eye witnesses there, to be able to prove the case either way.²⁶

However, Downer's statement was followed by a well-timed leak of classified intelligence material that differed spectacularly from Downer's assurances.

²³ J. Lyons, 'The secret Timor dossier', *The Bulletin*, 12 October 1999, pp. 25-9.

²⁴ A. Downer, Press Conference, Parliament House, Canberra, 14 March 1999.

²⁵ I. Christalis, *Bitter Dawn* (London: Zed Books, London, 2002), pp. 129-135.

²⁶ A. Downer, Interview with Glen Milne, Channel Seven, 11 April 1999.

The Defence Intelligence Organisation's preliminary assessment of the massacre was contained in its Current Intelligence Brief dated 8 April 1999 (three days before Downer's comments absolving the Indonesian military):

ABRI had fired tear gas into the church and apparently did not intervene when the pro-independence activists were attacked. BRIMOB [Police Mobile Brigade] were allegedly standing behind the attacked at the church and firing into the air... ABRI is culpable whether it actively took part in the violence, or simply let it occur.²⁷

The combination of leaked intelligence material, increased visibility of events in East Timor and Brereton's outspoken advocacy of an armed international presence on the ground were having an effect on Downer's credibility.

Inside the Labor party, defenders of the old policy moved to contain Brereton's growing influence. Kevin Rudd, then a Labor backbencher, signaled his divergence from Brereton's policy stance. He invited Dr Harold Crouch of the Australian National University to address Labor's National Security and Trade Caucus Committee. According to members of the committee, Crouch supported Rudd, expressing the view that Brereton's call for peacekeepers was unsound.²⁸ Rudd's activities did not go unnoticed; a few months later, the Indonesian government invited him to visit East Timor while preventing Laurie Brereton from doing so.

Rudd coordinated his visit to East Timor with the Indonesian government, the Australian embassy in Jakarta, and Downer's office. Just hours before getting on the plane, Rudd called Brereton to inform him of the trip. This call took place only *after* the Howard government had started briefing members of the press gallery, meaning that Rudd had manoeuvred with the government against his own party's spokesperson. Journalists were told that Brereton was completely marginalised even in his own party, because Rudd could go to East Timor whereas Brereton could not. A spokesman for Downer said that the episode "just proves Mr Brereton's irrelevance, and that irrelevance has been brought about by irresponsibility."²⁹ As it turned out, Rudd was ordered to cancel his trip to East Timor by the leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, who made it clear that it was unacceptable for the Indonesian or Australian governments to drive a diplomatic wedge between members of the parliamentary Labor Party.

In June 1999, the US military's Hawaii-based Pacific Command raised the possibility of attaching Australian military officers to a possible US peace

²⁷ D. Ball, *Silent Witness: Australian Intelligence and East Timor*, in H. McDonald, D. Ball, J. Dunn, G. van Klinken, D. Bouchier, D. Kammen and R. Tanter, *Masters of Terror: Indonesia's Military and Violence in East Timor in 1999*, Canberra Paper no. 145 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 2002).

²⁸ Author's interview with some of the participants.

²⁹ P. Cole-Adams, 'Jakarta's diplomatic snub puts boot into shamed Brereton', *The Age*, 12 May 1999.

enforcement operation in East Timor. The US request spoke of using “overwhelming force to stop the killing” and was conveyed to the Commander Australian Theatre, Air Vice Marshal Treloar. Since Treloar commanded the headquarters that would oversee any deployment of troops to East Timor, the US military was deliberately addressing the Australian Defence Force (ADF) officer best placed to advise the government that the proposal was feasible.³⁰ Treloar undertook to refer the request to senior levels in the Australian government. The request was declined “after lengthy, top-level consideration.”³¹

When asked about such a request during Question Time in Parliament, Downer initially claimed that he had neither seen the cable nor knew of the request, although he was an addressee, as were the Prime Minister, the Minister for Defence and the heads of their respective departments. Downer assured the House that he was “completely unaware of any proposal by the United States defence force to mount a peace enforcement exercise in East Timor.”³² A diplomatic cable containing a copy of the request was leaked to members of the press. Late that night, the government learnt that early editions of the next day’s *Age* were carrying detailed excerpts of the cable. Downer rushed back to Parliament at 11:32 p.m. and made a “clarification”, saying that “apparently” the issue “was informally raised” by officials who “asked hypothetically” about peace enforcement. But, he continued, this wasn’t a “formal United States government request.”³³ It was Downer’s third forced ‘clarification’ since becoming Foreign Minister.

The Australian government refused a direct US request to hand over intelligence material detailing links between the Indonesian armed forces and pro-Jakarta militias. The requests were made on several occasions to Australia’s Ambassador in Jakarta, John McCarthy, and to Australia’s Ambassador to the US, Andrew Peacock. Both envoys refused to make the information available.³⁴ The Australian intelligence liaison officer to the US, Merv Jenkins, was required to exchange intelligence as part of his normal duties. The US intelligence community was particularly interested in material that tied the Indonesian military to the militias. When Jenkins passed on such intelligence to his US counterparts, he was placed under heavy pressure by the Australian authorities, who flew to the US, interrogated him and threatened him with prosecution and imprisonment. Jenkins committed

³⁰ P. Daley, ‘US marines set for Dili’, *The Age*, 10 August 1999.

³¹ P. Daley, ‘We snub offer to send in the Marines’, *Sunday Age*, 31 August 1999.

³² A. Downer, Response to Question without Notice, House of Representatives, 9 August 1999.

³³ A. Downer, Clarification of Response to Question without Notice, House of Representatives, 9 August 1999.

³⁴ M. Wilkinson, ‘Why we kept Timor secrets from the US’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 August 1999.

suicide following this treatment.³⁵ A senior officer of the US Embassy in Canberra contacted Brereton's policy adviser, Dr Philip Dorling, to convey

the concern of the United States intelligence agencies that, notwithstanding public statements to the contrary, the Australian government had withheld or otherwise delayed the sharing with the US of important intelligence material relating to Indonesian military and militia activities.³⁶

In his article, Hugh White correctly cites his statement during senate estimates,

We believe that Indonesian armed forces have been actively engaged in support and in encouraging the pro-integration movements and that that has contributed significantly to the security problems in East Timor. That has been the subject of repeated and very high-level representations by the Australian government to Indonesia.³⁷

But he doesn't cite what he said in the very same statement:

I think it would be fair to say that ABRI, now TNI, has taken in some ways quite remarkable steps towards becoming—viewing the Indonesian political situation as a whole—a politically neutral and constructive partner with other elements of Indonesian society in seeking to genuinely reform the Indonesian political structure.³⁸

Sitting beside him that afternoon was Alan Behm, Head of the International Policy Division in the Department of Defence. Referring to the close links between the ADF and the Indonesian military, Senator Hogg asked Behm "what benchmarks were set for the development of the bilateral defence relationship?" Behm responded,

If I could interpret your question as meaning the purposes of the bilateral defence relationship, I am not sure that we have set specific benchmarks. There are things we are going to do and we propose to do them at a certain time.³⁹

There is overwhelming evidence that the government's policy was functioning in support of the Indonesian occupation. When Howard visited the US in July 1999, he praised the Indonesian government and urged the US to be more understanding of it. As he put it:

³⁵ ABC TV, *Four Corners*, 14 February 2000.

³⁶ P. Daley, 'Timor: Envoy claims US kept in dark', *The Bulletin*, 4 May 2004.

³⁷ White, 'The Road to INTERFET: Reflections on Australian Strategic Decisions Concerning East Timor, December 1998-September 1999', p. 77, n 12.

³⁸ Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, *Official Hansard*, 8 June 1999, p. 280, <www.aph.gov.au/hansard/senate/commtee/s2351.pdf> [Accessed 18 May 2008].

³⁹ Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, *Official Hansard*, 8 June 1999, p. 277, <www.aph.gov.au/hansard/senate/commtee/s2351.pdf> [Accessed 21 May 2008].

We remain very much of the view that the Indonesian Government deserves a great deal of credit for two things. Firstly for the steps it's taken to embrace democracy in Indonesia as a whole, which is quite a historical development and also the commitment to hold an open ballot... I said that Indonesia deserved from the world perhaps a little more credit and a little more praise and understanding...⁴⁰

These public statements of support sent a clear signal to the Indonesian authorities.

The Tide Turns

The ballot was held on 30 August 1999. Despite the climate of fear, the campaign of intimidation, the presence of dubious voters from West Timor, and the fact that many voters did not believe their votes were secret, 78.5% of registered voters opted for independence from Indonesia. The results were announced on Saturday 4 September 1999. The Indonesian military began a campaign of forced displacement, driving approximately 250,000 East Timorese across the border to West Timor. According to the United Nations and a subsequent investigation by Indonesia's National Human Rights Commission, approximately 70% of the buildings in East Timor were destroyed, vital infrastructure was crippled, and towns across East Timor were left without running water, electricity or telephones.⁴¹

Australian defence planners implemented Operation Spitfire, which involved a military escort from the UN compound to Dili airport, and then a one-way trip out of East Timor. The evacuation of UN staff, journalists, foreign observers and a few East Timorese allowed Indonesia to act without foreign witnesses, permitting it to manoeuvre without restrictions, reverse the results of the ballot and retain East Timor. On 5 September 1999, while the burning of Dili was underway, Downer said,

I get the impression that President Habibie, Mr Alatas, General Wiranto are all trying to do the right thing and some of the commanders are clearly trying to do the right thing.⁴²

By this stage, however, public outrage in Australia and internationally was reaching tsunami-like proportions. The Howard government finally reversed policy and asked for international assistance to convince the Indonesian military to stop. Portugal's prime minister, Antonio Guterres, telephoned President Clinton, saying that Portuguese troops would be pulled out of Kosovo if a peacekeeping force were not deployed to East Timor. Portugal

⁴⁰ J. Howard, Press Conference, Willard Inter-Continental Hotel, Washington DC, 11 and 12 July 1999.

⁴¹ Report of the Indonesian Commission of Investigation into Human Rights Violations, 2002, <<http://www.jsmp.minihub.org/Resources/2000/KPP%20Ham%20%28e%29.htm>> [Accessed 18 May 2008], pp. 15-59.

⁴² Max Blenkin and Fiona Hamilton, 'UN would veto peace mission without Indon approval', AAP, 5 September 1999.

prevented sixteen US military flights from departing its airbase in the Azores. For US strategic planners, a really significant source of pressure was the US Congress, where many senators and representatives were urging immediate action. All the years of lobbying undertaken by US activists were paying off. Pro-East Timor members of Congress were able to harness the support of a majority of their fellow congressmen. US senators Leahy and Feingold proposed legislation to bar US support for financial assistance to Indonesia. US strategists reacted swiftly. As a senior official said, “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.”⁴³ The main concern was to terminate the Indonesian military’s operations. Once that was accomplished, a peacekeeping force would still be required to prevent further loss of life, but the Australian-led force would be able to cope.

The US ensured that its message to the Indonesian military was delivered in person—Admiral Dennis Blair, commander-in-chief of the US forces in the Pacific, met General Wiranto in Jakarta on 8 September 1999, informing him that military ties were being suspended.⁴⁴ Defence secretary William Cohen spoke of “serious economic consequences.”⁴⁵ State Department spokesman James Rubin warned that “Indonesia’s relations with the international community, including the United States, are at risk here.”⁴⁶ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Hugh Shelton, telephoned Wiranto several times during the week after the announcement of the referendum result. Jakarta remained adamant past the first deadline, triggering a suspension of all US military assistance.⁴⁷ President Clinton publicly warned that

if Indonesia does not end the violence, it must invite—it *must invite*—the international community to assist in restoring security ... it would be a pity if the Indonesian recovery were crashed by this.⁴⁸

In an emergency debate in the UN Security Council on 12 September 1999, US envoy Richard Holbrooke finally warned Indonesia that it faced “the point of no return in international relations” if it did not accept an international peacekeeping force.⁴⁹

The Indonesian military’s resistance ended within hours. On 12 September 1999, Habibie and Wiranto emerged from a special cabinet meeting. Before

⁴³ P. Hartcher, ‘The ABC of winning US support’, *Australian Financial Review*, 13 September 1999.

⁴⁴ P. Wolfson, *Statement by Under-Secretary of State to the US Congress*, Voice of America, 9 September 1999.

⁴⁵ W. Cohen, ‘Remarks on East Timor’, *Voice of America*, 8 September 1999.

⁴⁶ J. Rubin, *Daily Press Briefing*, US Department of State, 8 September 1999.

⁴⁷ L. Dinger, *East Timor and US Foreign Policy: Making Sausage* (Washington DC: United States National War College, National Defense University, 2000).

⁴⁸ P. Shenon, ‘President asserts Jakarta must act or admit troops’, *New York Times*, 10 September 1999. (Emphasis in the original)

⁴⁹ T. Dodd and P. Hartcher, ‘Humiliation for Jakarta’, *Australian Financial Review*, 13 September 1999, p. 1.

the television cameras and microphones of the assembled international media, Habibie announced that his government had decided to allow a UN force into East Timor. Wiranto's presence beside Habibie sent a clear signal that the TNI had agreed to support the decision. Tellingly, Australian strategic planners initially named the peacekeeping force IFET—International Force East Timor. They were soon told that IFET already existed; it was the International Federation for East Timor, a global coalition of activists who had campaigned for East Timorese self-determination for years. Even at the very end, strategists were unaware of the powerful forces that had propelled them into a policy reversal. They renamed their force InterFET.⁵⁰

Tactical Implications of the Strategic Reversal

This strategic reversal had obvious tactical implications. An examination of the latter will debunk some of the triumphalist claims made nowadays by former ministers, such as the decision in March 1999 to raise another brigade to high alert.⁵¹ The fact is that this brigade was an already existing formation, not a new brigade, and was told to be prepared to move on 28 days' notice, not "high alert". This brigade was actually required to deal with the possibility of Australian and other nationals needing to be evacuated from Jakarta in case of election-related violence in June 1999.

The Post Operations Report prepared by the ADF puts this in perspective: as a consequence of the move to 28 days' notice, 80 new riflemen were posted to one of the major units in the brigade. This resulted in "deficiencies [which] profoundly affected [our] readiness and ultimately our capability on deployment." It "gave commanders little confidence in [these] soldiers' abilities." In fact, when the unit deployed to East Timor, these soldiers were withdrawn to the rear echelon and not used. The unit "was offered new .50 calibre machine guns in mid September but declined due to lack of training time, confidence in the weapon system, etc". The Post Operations Report concluded that, for some of the major units, no language training packages "were made available through the system for possible operations in East Timor at any stage during 1999." To the contrary,

there was an active policy of suppressing access to information ... This policy militated against having colloquial linguists and a culturally aware [unit] for deployment as part of InterFET.

There was "almost a reverse planning sequence where the tactical and operational levels were forced to plan with limited strategic guidance." In the

⁵⁰ Author's observation, Headquarters Australian Defence Force, Canberra, September 1999.

⁵¹ See for example, I. McPhedran, 'Cosgrove new top brass - Salute to popular Timor action hero', *Courier Mail*, 29 May 2002; D. Lague, 'Moore's Forced Exit Spells By-election Gamble', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 December 2000.

final week before the deployment, “the strategic circumstances were such that the execution date was uncertain and continually delayed.” The

logistic effort ... was limited by the lack of specialist equipment, particularly container handling, water purification and distribution equipment, and mobile refrigeration.⁵²

The ADF, not expecting to have to arrange for a peacekeeping force, had to borrow 4000 flak jackets from the United States. The head of the military’s support command, Major General Mueller, said that the demand for items that were not in its catalogue had “been very, very significant” and

led to a very significant surge in local procurement activity, initially in Darwin and subsequently amongst procurement officers at the Defence National Storage and Distribution Centre in Sydney.

According to Mueller, there was also “some central procurement action surge on the part of the Army Equipment Management Agency”.⁵³ The military’s troop transport ships, the 8450 tonne *Manoora* and *Kanimbla*, would have been able to transport troops and heavy vehicles, but these were not refitted in time and so were not operational until the year after.⁵⁴

When the Australian National Audit Office later conducted a performance audit into the management of the deployment, it concluded that the Department of Defence

could not provide evidence that formal planning for [a multilateral operation] began until later in 1999 ... The nature and size of the ADF involvement in East Timor were not known until shortly before deployment.

This is because

there was no government strategic requirement for the ADF to be able to form or lead an international peace-keeping coalition force... the actual nature and size of the military operations to be undertaken were not clear until shortly before deployment. The number, size and force capability to be provided, and the support required, by the non-Australian troop contributing nations were not known until after the deployment had started.⁵⁵

Space precludes a detailed catalogue here, but a systematic evaluation of these tactical implications and the government’s public statements at key moments provide a most illuminating insight into what the consequences of

⁵² Post-Operations Report, notes obtained by the author. See also Australian National Audit Office, *Management of Australian Defence Force Deployments to East Timor*, Audit Report No. 38 (Canberra: Australian National Audit Office, 2002).

⁵³ D. Mueller, *Committee Hansard*, Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 2 December 1999.

⁵⁴ A. Cobb, *East Timor and Australia’s Security Role* (Canberra: Parliamentary Library, 21 September 1999).

⁵⁵ Australian National Audit Office, *Audit Report No. 38*.

the strategic policy actually were—that foreign witnesses would be evacuated while the Indonesian military would be free to act unimpeded.

Forgetting History

When it comes to Australia-Indonesia relations, strategists have frequently under-estimated public opinion, and then been frustrated by the challenges it poses. More than a year before Indonesia's 1975 invasion of East Timor, William Pritchett, First Assistant Secretary in the Department of Defence, warned policymakers that it would not be possible to conceal Indonesian brutalities from the Australian public. Nor would it be possible to conduct a good working relationship with Indonesia in the face of sustained public condemnation. He argued that Australia should work towards "the emergence of the territory (East Timor) through self-determination, as an independent state" despite Indonesian objections.⁵⁶ Pritchett's view was rejected in favour of a supposedly hard-headed, realistic alternative, and negative public opinion bedeviled the Australia-Indonesia relationship for more than two decades. Civil society groups in Australia and overseas took up the cause of East Timor, preparing the ground for Brereton's policy shift.

Even before the invasion, the leading lights of Australian diplomacy covered up the truths of the murders of five foreign journalists at Balibo in East Timor. Allan Taylor, for example, went to East Timor on 28th April 1976, supposedly to lead an investigation into their deaths. The team based itself in Kupang, West Timor, and made two trips of less than a day each by helicopter to Balibo during their twelve-day stay. Taylor had previously received detailed briefings from the Indonesian authorities; he had been given advance notice of the exact details of the attack on Balibo,

down to the unmarked Portuguese-style uniforms or civilian dress the Indonesian troops would be wearing to ensure 'deniability' so they could maintain the fiction that only pro-Indonesian local irregulars were involved.⁵⁷

He said none of this in his report, which was not tabled in Parliament but quietly deposited in the Parliamentary Library. Taylor had an escape clause—the report's findings were based on the information obtained during the two visits to Balibo. Naturally, if that is what the findings were based on, the report would conceal any prior knowledge or inculpatory evidence.

But the Indonesian military's actions could not be concealed from the Australian public, nor could a good bilateral relationship be conducted in the face of sustained public condemnation. The liberation of East Timor in 1999 represented a major crisis in Australia-Indonesia relations. Australian

⁵⁶ W. Way (ed), *Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese Timor 1974-1976* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000), pp. 84, 190.

⁵⁷ D. Ball and H. McDonald, *Death in Balibo, Lies in Canberra* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 2000), p. 67.

strategy, often criticised on moral grounds, had failed by its own standards of pragmatism, practicality and hard-headedness.

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