

# Australian imperialism and East Timor

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The Howard Government's military intervention in East Timor in 1999 was an act of imperialism. It was not forced on a reluctant government by popular pressure, nor were its aims humanitarian. Rather, the intervention used military power to secure longstanding strategic interests of the Australian state. From 1974, successive Australian governments supported Indonesia's occupation of East Timor in order to foreclose the possibility of rival powers gaining influence in the Indonesian archipelago, which might allow them to threaten Australian interests. But, by September 1999, the Indonesian occupation had become untenable. Australia inserted military forces into East Timor to ensure that the transition to independence would be relatively orderly, avoiding a destabilising power vacuum. The intervention also boosted Australia's ability to defend its economic and strategic interests in the new nation. The success and domestic popularity of the intervention allowed the Howard Government to increase military spending and act more aggressively to defend Australia's imperial interests in the Southwest Pacific.

During the Indonesian occupation, East Timor assumed almost totemic significance in debates over Australian foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Australia's support for the occupation attracted sharp criticism, not only from the far left but also from unions, churches and even the mainstream media. But for the foreign policy establishment, anything less than absolute pragmatism in relations with Indonesia was denounced as woolly-brained, bleeding heart leftism.

1 The question of East Timor is explored in much greater depth in Sam Pietsch 'Australia's military intervention in East Timor, 1999', PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2010, <http://thesis.anu.edu.au/public/adt-ANU20091214.122004>, accessed on 24 May 2010.

This rancor was punctured by Australia's military intervention in East Timor in September 1999, after a referendum there had chosen full independence. Australian troops intervened after widespread violence and destruction at the hands of the Indonesian military, and seemingly secured the new nation's independence. There is a near total consensus that the military deployment was a positive development, and a fundamental break from previous Australian policy. Most former critics of that policy joined in this narrative of national redemption, including many on the far left.

If the intervention 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. This article argues that in reality the intervention was an act of Australian imperialism, a continuation of previous Australian policy by other means.<sup>2</sup> It was designed not to aid the East Timorese, but to secure the strategic objectives of the Australian state. The Howard Government engineered a remarkable political victory, pursuing its own preferred policy while drawing support from those who were normally its critics. This in turn fostered acquiescence to a more aggressive policy of Australian intervention in the South Pacific region generally.

### The left-populist justification for intervention

The mainstream view holds that Australia's intervention in East Timor was driven by obvious humanitarian concerns. This was held to be 'self-evident' by then Foreign Minister Alexander Downer.<sup>3</sup> This article will not deal explicitly with that position, which is simply not credible. The Indonesian invasion and occupation cost as many as 200,000

- 2 At the time, such criticism was mounted by politically insignificant radical leftwing organisations; for examples, see *After the ballot: imperialism at work in East Timor*, <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/archive/timor/menu2.htm>, accessed 29 February 2008; ISO National Committee 'Socialists and the East Timor Crisis' *Socialist Worker Review* 3, November 1999; Jeff Sparrow 'Timor and the Left' *Socialist Alternative* October 1999, p. 5. No academic works have been written from this perspective, although Nevins makes a similar argument regarding US involvement in East Timor in 1999; Joseph Nevins *A not-so-distant horror: mass violence in East Timor* Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2005, pp. 133-134, 195-200. Some of the key strategic issues have also been touched on from a realist perspective, including an account by Hugh White of his experience as Deputy Secretary in the Department of Defence at the time, 'The road to INTERFET: reflections on Australian strategic decisions concerning East Timor, December 1998-September 1999' *Security Challenges* 4 (1) 2008, especially pp. 73-76. See also Alan Dupont, 'The strategic implications of an independent East Timor' in James Fox and Dionisio Babo Soares (eds) *Out of the ashes: destruction and reconstruction of East Timor* ANU E Press, Canberra 2003, pp. 179-188; Alan Ryan "'Primary responsibilities and primary risks": Australian Defence Force participation in the International Force East Timor' *Study Paper* 304, Land Warfare Studies Centre, 2005, pp. 31-33.
- 3 Alexander Downer 'East Timor: looking back on 1999' *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 54 (1) 2000, p. 8. A much more subtle version of this argument can be found in James Cotton *East Timor, Australia and regional order: intervention and its aftermath in Southeast Asia* Routledge Curzon, London 2004.

East Timorese lives, or one third of the population,<sup>4</sup> yet it was supported by both Australia and the United States. It is not 'self-evident' why humanitarian concerns triumphed in 1999, but not earlier.

Of greater interest is the argument that the intervention came about because of a mass protest movement, which forced the Australian Government to act against its own desires. The leading proponent of this position is Clinton Fernandes.<sup>5</sup> Fernandes maintains that from 1975 through to September 1999 Australia consistently aimed to prevent Timorese independence and placate Indonesia, and did not want to deploy Australian troops in East Timor. What changed this situation was 'a tidal wave of public outrage',<sup>6</sup> which forced the Government to act against its own wishes.

Fernandes employs a left-populist critique of Australian politics, in which elite policy makers and intellectuals control the state in ways which are conducive to the interests of Australian capitalism, but not necessarily in the interests of, or supported by, the 'Australian public' in general. Policy towards Indonesia was long dominated by the 'Jakarta lobby' which supported the Suharto dictatorship because it was useful to the Australian state and capital.<sup>7</sup> The result was that from the Whitlam Government onwards, Australia prioritised good relations with Indonesia over any other aspect of the East Timor issue. In pursuing this policy, Australian governments 'neutralised' negative public opinion about Indonesia in Australia, and aided Indonesia in the diplomatic sphere.<sup>8</sup>

Even after Indonesia had agreed to a referendum in East Timor, 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. Instead, he suggests that the Australian Government deliberately gave diplomatic cover to Indonesia's campaign of terror, which was designed to prevent a vote for independence.<sup>9</sup> Although the ballot clearly favoured independence, Fernandes argues, Indonesia thought that the result could be reversed by creating 'new demographic facts on the ground' through 'ethnic cleansing'.<sup>10</sup> Howard and Downer were complicit in these actions because they withdrew foreign observers and then refused to intervene militarily. Fernandes effectively says, then, that the Australian Government aided attempted genocide so that Indonesia could retain control over East Timor. Claims

4 James Dunn *East Timor: a rough passage to independence* Longueville Books, Double Bay, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2003, pp. 277-278.

5 Clinton Fernandes *Reluctant saviour: Australia, Indonesia and the independence of East Timor* Scribe Publications, Melbourne 2004. See also Clinton Fernandes 'The road to INTERFET: bringing the politics back in' *Security Challenges* 4 (3) 2008, pp. 83-98.

6 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* p. 3.

7 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* p. 23.

8 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* pp. 12-18.

9 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* pp. 47-48.

10 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* pp. 77-79, 83-85, 114.

that the Indonesians were committing genocide or ethnic cleansing were likewise used by leftwing activist groups at the time to build support for military intervention as a moral imperative.<sup>11</sup>

Fortunately, according to Fernandes, the Howard Government's plans were thwarted by Australian supporters of East Timorese independence.<sup>12</sup> Leftwing activist and human rights groups, trade unions, and churches organised a series of street rallies, and trade unions imposed bans. The protests sought to reverse Australian support for Indonesia, and called for military intervention. 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

Fernandes's thesis is, not surprisingly, popular with activists engaged with the East Timor question, as it stresses the effectiveness of their efforts not only immediately after the ballot, but also during the entire period of the Indonesian occupation.<sup>15</sup> It also legitimates the unusual actions of broadly leftwing activists actively seeking a more aggressive Australian foreign and military policy.

Although Fernandes puts the most strident argument that the intervention was driven by popular pressure, a range of authors have adopted aspects of this position, combining it with variations on the 'moral imperative' theme. This accords with liberal political perspectives which want the Australian state to take strong international action, but action that is more in accord with moral principles. This results in a more or less critical

11 Joao Carrascalao 'Indonesia's ethnic cleansing target: kill 344,580 East Timorese' media release, National Council for Timorese Resistance, 8 September 1999, <http://www.labournet.de/internationales/crnt.html> accessed 29 May 2006; Pip Hinman 'Why Howard refuses to send troops to stop genocide' *Green Left Weekly*, 15 September 1999, p. 3.

12 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* pp. 88-95.

13 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* p. 94.

14 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* pp. 113-114.

15 Vanessa Hearman 'Timor: Australia's real role' *Green Left Weekly*, 20 October 2004, <http://www.greenleft.org.au/2004/603/31537>, accessed 15 April 2010; Terry Townsend *The left and UN military intervention in East Timor* Democratic Socialist Party, 2000, <http://www.dsp.org.au/links>, accessed 29 May 2007. Support for Fernandes's position has also been expressed to the author by a number of East Timor solidarity activists.

nationalist position, according to which popular pressure forced the Government to act in accordance with what the Australian nation always stood for at heart.<sup>16</sup>

Such analyses point to some common ground between the ‘humanitarian imperative’ and ‘popular pressure arguments, in that the intervention is seen as occurring outside the normal workings of Australian foreign policy, and representing a fundamental disjuncture with earlier policy. None of these analyses is 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 as a response to the immediate humanitarian crisis in September 1999. The Australian intervention only becomes understandable by reference to a force outside of the normal processes of international politics. Be it public pressure or morality, this force arrives *deus ex machina*, resulting in a previously inconceivable course of action from the Australian Government.

Fernandes does provide some historical context for the relation between capitalism, the Australian state and support for Suharto. But his formulations lack clarity. A ‘stable investment climate’ and ‘access to human and material resources’ are certainly general concerns for the capitalist state,<sup>17</sup> but Indonesia is not particularly important to Australia in this respect. Nor can it be said that Australia has ‘political and economic control’ of the Indonesian archipelago,<sup>18</sup> and in the post Cold War world, Fernandes’ argument that Australia desires ‘an Indonesia that is non-communist and integrated into the Western sphere of influence’<sup>19</sup> is outdated. Ultimately, Fernandes fetishises specific aspects of Australia’s foreign policy, such as anti-communism or the relationship with Indonesia, and hence he views the Timor intervention as an extraordinary break with these policies. At one level, obviously, this is correct, and needs to be explained. But if only the novel aspects of the immediate intervention are considered, deeper continuities with the pattern of Australia’s historical policy are obscured.

## The abiding interests of Australian imperialism

The 1999 intervention needs to be seen in the context of Australia’s position as a middle ranking power within the system of world imperialism. Australian policy makers promote the interests of Australian capital internationally, in the context of ongoing economic,

16 For examples, see Scott Burchill ‘East Timor, Australia and Indonesia’ in Damien Kingsbury (ed.) *Guns and ballot boxes: East Timor’s vote for independence* Monash Asia Institute, Victoria 2000, p. 181; Noam Chomsky *A new generation draws the line: Kosovo, East Timor and the standards of the West* Pluto Press, London 2000, p. 23; Balthasar Kehi ‘Australia’s relations with East Timor: people’s loyalty, government’s betrayal’ *Borderlands* 3 (3) 2004, [http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no3\\_2004/kehi\\_timor.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no3_2004/kehi_timor.htm), accessed 15 April 2010; John Martinkus *A dirty little war* Random House Australia, Sydney 2001, p. 348.

17 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* p. 22.

18 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* p. 23.

19 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* p. 5.

diplomatic and military competition between the major powers.<sup>20</sup> These interests are to some extent economic, including securing opportunities for investment abroad and markets for exports. Primarily, however, Australian imperialism is concerned with strategic objectives in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific. Any incursion into the country's immediate surrounds by a major power is seen as a potential threat to Australia's own territory, or to trade routes vital to Australia's economy. By extension, Canberra fears any political instability in this region, which might allow a hostile power to gain influence. At times of relative calm in the region, these strategic concerns can seem paranoid. But the policy makers simply cannot dismiss the possibility that Australia will be drawn into a re-eruption of conflict in Asia between major powers.

The Indonesian archipelago is important, simply because of geography. Indonesia itself is no threat. But any great power threat to Australia must come through this region. This has resulted in longstanding concerns for 'stability' in and 'good relations' with Indonesia, leading Canberra to support the moderate leaders of the young Indonesian republic, as well as the murderously anti-Communist Suharto dictatorship. Australia's interest in East Timor flows from these wider strategic concerns. During World War II Australia invaded then Portuguese Timor to forestall what it assumed was an inevitable Japanese invasion, resulting in the deaths of 40,000 East Timorese. In fact Japan had no intention of violating Portuguese sovereignty until Australia did so.<sup>21</sup>

Similar strategic concerns led the Whitlam Government to encourage Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor from late 1974.<sup>22</sup> Whitlam valued Suharto's anti-Communism and friendly attitude towards Australia, which he was not prepared to risk over East Timor.<sup>23</sup> But the prospect of an independent East Timor was also unattractive in its own right. As Whitlam told Suharto in September 1974;

... Portuguese Timor was too small to be independent. It was economically unviable. Independence would be unwelcome to Indonesia, to Australia and to

20 For an outline of how a classical Marxist understanding of imperialism can be applied to Australia, see Tom O'Lincoln 'The neighbour from hell: Australian imperialism' in Rick Kuhn (ed.) *Class and struggle in Australia* Pearson Education Australia, Melbourne 2005, pp. 178-194.

21 James Dunn *A people betrayed* Jacaranda Press, Milton 1983, pp. 19-23; Henry Frei 'Japan's reluctant decision to incorporate Portuguese Timor, 1 January 1942-20 February 1942' *Australian Historical Studies* 107 1996, pp. 299-301.

22 Good accounts can be found in Desmond Ball and Hamish McDonald *Death in Balibo lies in Canberra* Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 2000; Dunn *East Timor: a rough passage to independence*.

23 See David Goldsworthy et al 'Reorientation' in Peter Edwards and David Goldsworthy (eds) *Facing north: a century of Australian engagement with Asia, volume 2: 1970s to 2000* Melbourne University Press, Carlton 2003, pp. 360-362; Nancy Viviani 'Australians and the East Timor issue-the policy of the Whitlam government' in James Cotton (ed.) *East Timor and Australia: AIIA contributions to the policy debate* Australian Defence Studies Centre, Canberra 2000, pp. 83-85.

other countries in the region, because an independent Portuguese Timor would inevitably become the focus of attention of others outside the region.<sup>24</sup>

Examples of such strategic concerns could be multiplied several times over. In contrast, the documentary record does not reveal oil and gas resources in the Timor Sea to be a major consideration, although they were noted from time to time.<sup>25</sup> However, 'the relationship' with Indonesia is a specific tactic in a wider strategy, not an end in itself. Australia could modify its position when Suharto ceased to be a reliable ally.

## Events prior to the Australian intervention

Economic crisis and mass popular upheavals brought down the Suharto dictatorship in May 1998. This unleashed a resurgence of secessionist movements in a number of Indonesian provinces, most notably East Timor, but also Kalimantan, Ambon, Aceh and West Papua.<sup>26</sup> In East Timor, there was an increase in offensive military operations by Falintil, the independence guerilla force.<sup>27</sup> More importantly, there was an upsurge of civil political struggle. Major demonstrations in Dili in June and July 1998 called for a referendum on independence. In September, the protests grew into a general strike, with the civil service shut down and pro-independence youths maintaining roadblocks in and out of urban centres. Similar events occurred in December.<sup>28</sup> Indonesian military leaders did not simply crush this opposition, because the popular democratic movement had battered their self-confidence, making them less willing to use direct repression.<sup>29</sup>

- 24 'Document 26, Record of meeting between Whitlam and Soeharto, 6 September 1974' in Wendy Way (ed.) *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976* Melbourne University Press, Carlton South 2000, pp. 95-98.
- 25 For example, 'Document 3, Policy planning paper, 3 May 1974' in Wendy Way (ed.) *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976* Melbourne University Press, Carlton South 2000, p. 52.
- 26 Damien Kingsbury *The politics of Indonesia* Oxford University Press, South Melbourne 2002, pp. 145-165.
- 27 Muhammad Hikam 'Democracy in Indonesia and East Timor' *Pacifica Review* 12 (1) 2000, p. 81; Martinkus *A dirty little war* pp. 83-85; Lansell Taudevin *East Timor: too little too late* Duffy & Snellgrove Potts Point, 1999, p. 141.
- 28 'Aksi demo, pegawai tidak masuk kantor' *Suara Timor Timur*, 19 December 1998, p. 6; 'Demonstran batal duduki kantor Gubernur Timtim' *Suara Timor Timur*, 13 October 1998, p. 1; 'E. Timorese mark anniversary of 'invasion' with protests' *Jakarta Post*, 8 December 1998, p. 2; 'E. Timorese take break after two days of protests' *Jakarta Post*, 15 June 1998, p. 1; 'Mario Carrascalao: 'Saya berdoa ikut kerekayasa integrasi'' *Suara Timor Timur*, 16 December 1998, p. 6; Taudevin *East Timor: Too little too late* pp. 150-151, 194; 'Third day of protests in Dili' *Jakarta Post*, 14 October 1998, p. 2.
- 29 Hilmar Farid, Indonesian political activist and NGO worker in East Timor, interview conducted in Jakarta, 8 February 2007; Joaquim Fonseca, former student activist and NGO worker in East Timor, interview conducted in Dili, 22 November 2007; Nuno Rodriguez, East Timorese political activist and NGO worker with the Sahe Institute, interview conducted in Dili, 10 November 2007; Wilson, Indonesian political activist and former member of the PRD, interview conducted in Jakarta, 13 February 2007.

Independence groups were largely able to operate above ground and Dili's newspaper carried open discussion of the aims of the independence movement.<sup>30</sup>

A series of pressures forced the Indonesian president Habibie to seek a rapid resolution of the conflict. The occupation of East Timor cost perhaps US\$1 million per day in 1998.<sup>31</sup> Poverty ridden East Timor hardly seemed worth such expense at a time when the Indonesian budget was dependent on foreign economic aid. The continuation of this aid also partly depended on Habibie implementing political reforms, because of the link made both by foreign governments and international bodies, such as the IMF, between neo-liberal economic reform, democratisation and human rights. East Timor came to be seen internationally as a 'litmus test' for Habibie's reform credentials, with both houses of the US Congress calling for a self-determination vote in 1998.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, support for East Timorese self-determination was gaining ground in the Indonesian democracy movement and among NGOs, although it remained a minority position.<sup>33</sup> There was also increasing support for a change of policy among the middle and governing classes, a process which had begun several years earlier.<sup>34</sup> The Indonesian 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'.<sup>35</sup> Suharto had been forced from power by mass popular mobilisations. Pressure for reforms simply could not be totally ignored. A change in policy on East Timor would help alleviate this pressure. In late January 1999 Habibie announced that he had decided to allow an act of self-

30 For examples, see 'Referendum untuk Timtim positif' *Suara Timor Timur*, 16 July 1998, p. 1; 'Wakil Komandan Falantil Taur Matan Ruak: 'Kami berjuang untuk hentikan perang'' *Suara Timor Timur*, 4 September 1998, p. 1; 'Wawancara eksklusif dengan Xanana Gusmao: Menolak otonomi sebagai solusi final' *Suara Timor Timur*, 30 July 1998, p. 1.

31 John Taylor *East Timor: The price of freedom* Zed books, London 1999, p. 16.

32 Thomas Ambrosio 'East Timor independence: the changing nature of international pressure' in Robert Compton (ed.) *Transforming East Asian Domestic and International Politics* Ashgate, Aldershot 2002, pp. 124-130; Kees van Dijk *A country in despair: Indonesia between 1997 and 2000* KITLV Press, Leiden 2001, p. 296; David Webster 'Non-state diplomacy: East Timor 1975-99,' *Portuguese Studies Review* 11 (1) 2003, pp. 22-23.

33 Faried Cahyono, Indonesian journalist and member of the Independent Journalists' Alliance, interview conducted in Jogjakarta, 21 February 2007; Dhyta Caturani and Reiner, Indonesian student activists and former members of the PRD, interview conducted in Jakarta, 14 February 2007; Interview with Hilmar Farid; Agung Putri, Indonesian NGO worker and human rights activist, interview conducted in Jakarta, 14 February 2007; Nur Widi, Indonesian political activist and PRD member, interview conducted in Jogjakarta, 21 February 2007; Interview with Wilson.

34 Harold Crouch 'The TNI and East Timor policy' in James Fox and Dionisio Babo Soares (eds) *Out of the ashes: destruction and reconstruction of East Timor* ANU E Press, Canberra 2003, pp. 142-144; Don Greenlees and Robert Garran *Deliverance: the inside story of East Timor's fight for freedom* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest 2002, p. 37; Richard Tanter 'Indonesian politics after Suharto' *Arena* 11 1998, pp. 15-16.

35 'Vietnamnya Indonesia' *Tempo*, 11 January 1999, p. 42.



determination for East Timor, and that he wanted the whole situation settled by the year 2000.

The Indonesian military did not initially accept the change in policy. Because it was unable to engage as openly in violent repression of the independence movement, the military from mid-1998 organised pro-integration militia which could act as proxies. Several hundred people were killed before the ballot, with around 60,000 people forcibly displaced.<sup>36</sup> The purpose of the violence was not to prevent the ballot taking place or even, eventually, to orchestrate a victory for autonomy which the military must have known was impossible. Instead, by making the margin in favour of independence as narrow as possible and by creating violent unrest, the military aimed to discredit Habibie's policy and underline their own continued political importance.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the violence, 98 per cent of people registered to vote did so, and over 78 per cent of votes cast were in favour of breaking all ties with Indonesia. The announcement of the result triggered a campaign of violence and destruction of far greater intensity than before the ballot. There were three main aspects to this violence. First, around 900 people, and possibly up to 1,200, were killed.<sup>38</sup> This included some mass killings of displaced persons or whole villages which were thought to have supported independence. In addition, thousands were physically or sexually assaulted. Second, perhaps 400,000 people, or half the East Timorese population, were displaced from their homes. Up to 250,000 were transported across the border into West Timor, most against their will.<sup>39</sup> Third, the military destroyed as much of East Timor's physical infrastructure as possible, with towns razed in every region. The overall damage was estimated at around 70 per cent of buildings destroyed or rendered unusable. In Dili the destruction was virtually total.<sup>40</sup>

Although the violence was appalling, it did not amount to genocide or an attempt to retain control of East Timor. There is no evidence of the substantial infrastructure and planning required for that. There were no mass killings of refugees in West Timor, although

36 Geoffrey Robinson *East Timor 1999: crimes against humanity* United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2003, pp. 44-46. This is the most authoritative account of violence in East Timor both before and after the ballot.

37 Dunn *East Timor: a rough passage to independence* pp. 341-350; Damien Kingsbury 'The TNI and the militias' in Damien Kingsbury (ed.) *Guns and ballot boxes: East Timor's vote for independence* Monash Asia Institute, Victoria 2000, p. 73.

38 Robinson *East Timor 1999: crimes against Humanity* pp. 40, 44, 221-244.

39 Amnesty International *As violence descended: testimonies from East Timorese refugees* ASA 21/190/99 1999; Amnesty International *No end to the crisis for East Timorese refugees* 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.

40 Bob Breen *Mission accomplished, East Timor: Australian Defence Force participation in the International Forces East Timor (INTERFET)* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest 2000, pp. 18-19, 56-58; Robinson *East Timor 1999: crimes against Humanity* p. 44.

individual independence supporters were targeted. Moreover, the Indonesian forces made no attempt to seek out Falintil, instead devoting massive resources to the forced population transfer. They began evacuating their own personnel as early as 5 September<sup>41</sup> and had completely left many areas before Interfet arrived. They even destroyed their own bases and communications infrastructure, undermining their ability to undertake future military campaigns. As Nevins argues, 'The scorched-earth nature of the [Indonesian] rampage made it clear that the Indonesian military had no intention of staying in the territory.'<sup>42</sup>

An attempt to reverse the ballot would also have posed serious political problems for the military. They remained constrained by the considerations that led to the ballot in the first place, which were only reinforced by its outcome. Although the humiliation of Australia's intervention sealed Habibie's political downfall in late October, none of his rivals initiated a campaign to maintain the Indonesian occupation of East Timor.

The principle aim of the Indonesian military's scorched earth policy was to prevent the further break-up of Indonesia or the erosion of the military's power. It was, in Nevin's words,

... 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.<sup>43</sup>

Most importantly, it let other restive provinces, especially Aceh and West Papua, know that the military was still capable of intense repression.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, the military eventually accepted the loss of East Timor, hence its failure to seriously attempt to overturn the result of the act of self-determination.

There was nothing inevitable about East Timor gaining its independence. Either Indonesia's political or military elites might have decided to dig in their heels and try to maintain control of the territory. But multiple internal and external pressures increasingly meant it was not worth the cost of doing so. This has important ramifications for understanding the Australian intervention. First, the Indonesian Government and military were not compelled to leave East Timor by the arrival of Australian forces, they had already decided to leave. Second, whether or not East Timor became independent was a question largely beyond Australia's control. One way or another Indonesian rule in East

41 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade *East Timor in Transition 1998-2000: an Australian policy challenge* Canberra 2001, p. 127.

42 Nevins *A not-so-distant horror* p. 6.

43 Nevins *A not-so-distant horror* p. 5. See also Cotton *East Timor, Australia and regional order* pp. 62-64; Kingsbury 'The TNI and the militias' pp. 77-78.

44 For Indonesian fears that secessionism would spread, see John Bolton 'Indonesia: Asia's Yugoslavia?' *Far eastern economic review*, 1 April 1999, p. 31; Dellar Noer 'Mengatasi kerusuhan' *Republika*, 30 January 1999, p. 6; 'Separatism on the rise?' *Jakarta Post*, 16 March 1999, p. 4.

Timor was coming to an end. This was the objective reality to which the Howard Government was forced to respond.

### Shifts in Australian policy

An opinion poll published on 12 September 1999 recorded that 77 per cent of respondents were in favour of Australian troops forming part of an international force in East Timor.<sup>45</sup> More importantly, thousands of people took part in street demonstrations and workplace actions demanding intervention. Fernandes cites demonstrations in Sydney on 6, 8 and 11 September the last of which he estimates involved between 20,000 to 30,000 people.<sup>46</sup> There were numerous other protests around the country, the largest was a rally of 25,000 people in Melbourne.<sup>47</sup> Other examples included a picket of the Indonesian embassy in Canberra involving up to 500 people; a crowd which threw stones at the Indonesian consulate in Darwin; and a protest involving hundreds in Brisbane.<sup>48</sup> Trade union bans lent added political weight.<sup>49</sup> But the industrial pressure was primarily directed against Indonesian, not Australian interests, limiting the pressure on the Howard Government.

Undoubtedly there would have been a political price if the Government had simply allowed events in East Timor to run their course. By mid-September, the intervention was Howard's easiest option, in terms of domestic politics. Fernandes, however, argues that popular pressure was the decisive factor which *forced* Howard to adopt a policy to which he would otherwise have opposed.<sup>50</sup> There are two main problems with this position.

First, the protest movement was not strong enough to have such an impact in such a short time. A comparison with two other recent protest movements illustrates the point. 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. First, the 2003 campaign against an invasion of Iraq brought hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets in cities around Australia. The biggest street marches were estimated at 150,000 people in Melbourne and 200,000 in Sydney, at that time the largest protests ever seen in Australia.<sup>51</sup>

45 Newspan Market Research *Opinion polling on East Timor* 10-12 September 1999, [http://www.newspan.com.au/image\\_uploads/cgi-lib.25638.1.0902timor.pdf](http://www.newspan.com.au/image_uploads/cgi-lib.25638.1.0902timor.pdf), accessed 18 April 2007.

46 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* pp. 88-94.

47 'The tide of protest swells' *Australian*, 11 September 1999, p. 5.

48 Andrea Carson and Richard Baker 'Bans and boycotts: a nation acts' *Age*, 9 September 1999, p. 7; Lachlan Heywood 'Arrests in violent city marches' *Courier-mail*, 11 September 1999, p. 6; Kirsten Lawson 'Unions beef up protest' *Canberra times*, 8 September 1999, p. 2.

49 For examples see 'Boycott call as hunger strike starts' *Australian*, 10 September 1999, p. 2; Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* pp. 90-93; Nina Field 'Unions ban Indonesian goods, services' *Australian financial review*, 8 September 1999, p. 9; Brad Norrington 'Patchy response to industrial offensive' *Sydney morning herald*, 9 September 1999, p. 12; Brad Norrington 'Protests start with ships' *Sydney morning herald*, 8 September 1999, p. 11; 'Violence met with embargo' *Australian*, 7 September 1999, p. 2.

50 See Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* p. 114.

51 Valerie Lawson 'With one voice, the world says no' *Age*, 17 February 2003, p. 1.

There was support from many groups, notably the union movement and churches. On the eve of the war, an opinion poll indicated that 68 per cent of respondents were against Australian involvement in an invasion of Iraq which did not have UN approval.<sup>52</sup>

Second, the union movement's campaign against the 'WorkChoices' industrial relations legislation. 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 rallies during work-time had a bigger impact on Australian economic interests than the Timor campaign. It is estimated that workers attending a rally on 15 November 2005 cost employers in Victoria alone \$30 million.<sup>53</sup>

The second problem with Fernandes's argument is that of timing. Downer gave the first indication that Australia would be prepared to send troops to East Timor on 4 September.<sup>54</sup> On 6 and 7 September, the National Security Committee (a sub-committee of Cabinet) met to consider the situation, and decided to commit Australian forces.<sup>55</sup> On 7 September then, at the very latest, the Government had decided to intervene in East Timor.

According to Fernandes, however, the *first* 'serious protest action' in favour of intervention only took place on 6 September, mobilising 'several hundred' people. The largest protest Fernandes cites, and on which he bases much of his argument, took place on 11 September, several days *after* the decision to intervene was made.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, the decision to intervene was not a panicked reaction which came out of the blue, as Fernandes suggests. Rather it was the logical conclusion of a series of policy changes which began in late 1998. This is not to argue that the Howard Government desired East Timor's independence, or that the intervention had been planned for months before it took place. On the contrary, Australia's preferred option was always to see East Timor remain part of Indonesia. But from a relatively early stage, the Howard Government realised that the *status quo* in East Timor was no longer tenable and, in the first half of 1999, came to accept, however reluctantly, that this would probably mean independence. Given this reality, the Government's attention shifted to securing Australia's interests in East Timor directly. But Canberra also sought to maintain good relations with Indonesia, including with the military. The Howard Government therefore found itself balancing two conflicting priorities.

52 Newspoll Market Research *Opinion polling on military action against Iraq* 14-16 March 2003, [http://www.newspoll.com.au/image\\_uploads/cgi-lib.26256.1.0303war.pdf](http://www.newspoll.com.au/image_uploads/cgi-lib.26256.1.0303war.pdf), accessed 18 April 2007.

53 Paul Robinson 'Not happy, Mr Howard! Record crowds rally against work laws' *Age*, 16 November 2005, p. 1.

54 Fia Cumming 'Force ready and waiting' *Sydney morning herald*, 5 September 1999, p. 7.

55 See Greenlees and Garran *Deliverance* pp. 236-239; White 'The road to INTERFET' p. 82.

56 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* pp. 88-89.

By June 1998 Australia's position on East Timor had started to shift, with a diplomatic cable arguing that while it would be best if the issue was settled internally, this could only be achieved through genuine negotiation with the independence movement.<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, the Howard Government began to reach out to leading independence figures, including the imprisoned Xanana Gusmão. Such discussions convinced the Government that support for independence was overwhelming, and that a genuine act of self-determination would be necessary. East Timorese views on post-independence regional relations and arrangements to secure Australian investments in the resources sector were also canvassed.<sup>58</sup>

In December, Howard wrote to Habibie outlining a new Australian policy on East Timor, which encouraged Indonesia to offer the East Timorese a period of autonomy lasting many years, before an eventual ballot on independence.<sup>59</sup> But Australia's cautious move was overtaken by Habibie's decision to resolve the situation quickly. In May details of the ballot, under a UN brokered agreement between Indonesia and Portugal, were announced. Australia provided funding and logistical support for the self-determination process, as well as contributing to the UN police presence.<sup>60</sup>

While support for self-determination for the East Timorese was a major departure from Australia's previous policy, other elements in the approach to East Timor's status remained in place. First, Australia continued to recognise Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor. This forestalled the possibility of any outside force assuming control of the territory without Indonesia's agreement.

Second, Australia reaffirmed its position that an autonomous East Timor should remain an integral part of Indonesia, because full independence would lead to regional instability.<sup>61</sup> This remained Australia's official position until the ballot. As early as February, however, Downer publicly admitted that the East Timorese would probably choose full independence.<sup>62</sup> In early March, he did not even express Australian support for autonomy

57 David Goldsworthy 'East Timor' in \ Edwards and Goldsworthy *Facing north* p. 225.

58 Department of Foreign Affairs *East Timor in transition 1998-2000* pp. 177-179; Australian Parliament *East Timor: final report of the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee*, 2000, p. 176; Goldsworthy 'East Timor' p. 226; Lindsay Murdoch 'Australia in secret E Timor peace role' *Age*, 18 July 1998, p. 1; Taudevin *East Timor: too little too late* p. 155; José Teixeira, Member of the East Timorese parliament and former minister in the Alkatiri Government, interview conducted in Dili, 21 November 2007.

59 Department of Foreign Affairs *East Timor in Transition 1998-2000* pp. 29-32, 181.

60 Cotton *East Timor, Australia and regional order* pp. 91-94.

61 Alexander Downer *Transcript of interview with Alexander Downer on ABC TV*, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 31 August 1999, [http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/transcripts/1999/990831abc\\_various\\_et.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/transcripts/1999/990831abc_various_et.html), accessed 28 March 2007; John Howard *Transcript of interview with John Howard on ABC TV* Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 9 February 1999, <http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Interview/1999/730rep0902.cfm>, accessed 21 March 2007.

62 Geoff Kitney 'Downer in East Timor force talks' *Age*, 6 February 1999, p. 7.

as a final solution, stressing instead the need for a peaceful transition, whatever the Timorese decided.<sup>63</sup> Eventually, the issue was simply dropped.<sup>64</sup>

Although Australia preferred the continuation of East Timor's incorporation into Indonesia, the new policy recognised that East Timorese independence might now be inevitable.<sup>65</sup> Continuing to push strongly the idea that the East Timorese should choose to remain within Indonesia could only be an embarrassment after the ballot. By supporting self-determination, Australia at least ensured that it could influence rapidly changing events.

This change in policy was widely endorsed by commentators. The general support is best illustrated by comments in *The Australian*, home to Australia's leading rightwing foreign affairs commentators, and previously a bastion of support for the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. In January 1999, 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'.<sup>66</sup> By the time of the ballot, Greg Sheridan went so far as to say that independence in East Timor was preferable to the current instability.<sup>67</sup> On 4 September, even before the announcement of the ballot results, both Paul Kelly and Sheridan threw their support behind an Australian intervention.<sup>68</sup> The newspaper even published a 'protest diary' listing events the public could attend, an extraordinary move for a newspaper which had criticised public protests against Indonesian policy in the past.<sup>69</sup> Precisely the ideological forces Fernandes correctly identifies as previously promoting support for the Indonesian occupation, had now come to support intervention.

## Australia's response to violence in East Timor

While trying to shape developments in East Timor, Australia still needed to manage the wider relationship with Indonesia. Most importantly, Australia did not seriously pressure Habibie to allow international forces into East Timor before the ballot.<sup>70</sup> To support this position, the Howard Government consistently played down the violence in East Timor or

63 Alexander Downer 'Address by Alexander Downer in the Australia-Asia Institute's Australia in Asia Lecture Series' Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1 March 1999, [http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/speeches/foreign/1999/990301\\_indon\\_trans.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/speeches/foreign/1999/990301_indon_trans.html), accessed 21 March 2007.

64 Lindsay Murdoch 'Australia neutral on East Timor: Downer' *Age*, 1 August 1999, p. 1.

65 See White 'The road to INTERFET' pp. 74-76.

66 'Timor policy hesitant but inevitable' *Australian* editorial, 13 January 1999, p. 10.

67 Greg Sheridan 'Why US forces won't get the nod' *Australian*, 1 September 1999, p. 9.

68 Paul Kelly 'We can help if Jakarta lets us' *Australian*, 4 September 1999, p. 13; Greg Sheridan 'Time for us to send in peacekeepers' *Australian*, 4 September 1999, p. 13.

69 'Protest diary' *Australian*, 11 September 1999, p. 3.

70 William Maley 'Australia and the East Timor crisis: some critical comments' *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 54 (2) 2000, pp. 157-158.

attempted to shift blame away from the Indonesian military, even though intelligence sources kept Canberra well informed about the real situation.<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup>

Government sources of intelligence meant the Australian Government almost certainly anticipated the general post-ballot strategy of the Indonesian military. Consequently, Australian military planners started considering their options in East Timor early in 1999.<sup>73</sup> Planning was kept highly secret, because to openly prepare for an intervention would have been to effectively renounce support for Indonesian sovereignty in East Timor. In May, detailed planning began for 'Operation Spitfire', an evacuation of Australian and other foreign nationals in the event of post-ballot violence. 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 co-operated with evacuations by air. This version of Spitfire was put into action on 6 September.<sup>74</sup> But contingency plans were also made for a far stronger Australian force to be inserted into East Timor if necessary, 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, including the numbers and types of troops used, was adapted to form the basis for 'Operation Warden', as Australia's full-scale deployment in late September became known.<sup>75</sup> As Bob Breen writes in his detailed account, 'In simple terms, *Operation Warden* was *Operation Spitfire* with more combat power and a larger logistic tail.'<sup>76</sup> 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 larger operation, in his role as commander of the Deployable Joint Force Headquarters. Planning the evacuation was therefore, in effect, used as a political cover for planning the later intervention.

Logistical planning for Operation Warden began as early as July. But logistics officers were explicitly forbidden, for example, from purchasing additional stores or pre-positioning supplies and personnel in northern Australia, in case Indonesia learnt of the

71 Desmond Ball 'Silent witness: Australian intelligence and East Timor' *The Pacific review* 14 (1) 2001, p. 41; Department of Foreign Affairs *East Timor in transition 1998-2000* pp. 57-61; John Lyons 'The secret Timor dossier' *Bulletin*, 12 October 1999, pp. 24-29.

72 Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* pp. 47-58.

73 Breen *Mission accomplished* pp. 2-4; Robert Garran 'Downer's secret plan for E Timor's future' *Australian*, 22 February 1999, p. 1.

74 Breen *Mission accomplished* pp. 7-14.

75 See Breen *Mission accomplished* pp. 23-24, 33-43.

76 Breen *Mission accomplished* p. 21.

preparations.<sup>77</sup> Some officers did, however, begin to learn Timorese dialects.<sup>78</sup> There are reports that Australian special forces made landings in East Timor from April 1999, in order to reconnoitre potential landing sites and to observe the Indonesian military.<sup>79</sup> The Government also put an army battalion on a heightened state of readiness from March, so that the unit was ready to deploy within 28 days, and in April leased a high speed catamaran, which was used in the first deployment of Australian troops from Darwin. All of these decisions indicate that the Government was planning for a period of heightened military operations.

This does not mean that there was advanced planning for the full-scale military intervention that eventually occurred. But there *was* substantial preparation for the Australian military's immediate task of securing Dili and surrounding areas as Indonesian forces were withdrawn. The result was that within two weeks of the decision to intervene Australian troops were operating on the ground in East Timor.

What did this military operation achieve? Almost all commentators believe that the intervention was necessary because of the violence perpetrated by the Indonesian military and its proxies. This justification is placed in question by the fact that the Indonesian military was departing the territory, not attempting to maintain its occupation of East Timor. The humanitarian achievements of the intervention were also far less than generally assumed.

The mass murder of independence supporters was the most compelling reason given for intervention in East Timor. But the timing of the killings has not been much remarked upon, because it is axiomatic to both sides of the debate on Australia's policy that a military intervention in East Timor was necessary to stop militia violence.<sup>80</sup> The death toll would indeed have risen somewhat if the intervention had not taken place. Some killings did continue after Interfet (International Force for East Timor) landed on 20 September. The arrival of international troops also set a definite deadline for Indonesia's withdrawal, without which such murders would have continued, although probably with decreasing frequency. The sort of mass killings used to justify the intervention had, however, already largely stopped by the time Habibie announced an international force would be allowed into East Timor. There are three exceptions to this, in which a total of around 40 people were killed. But in none of these cases was Interfet in a position to intervene to stop the violence, because it did not yet have a presence in the areas concerned.<sup>81</sup>

77 Breen *Mission accomplished* p. 123.

78 Brendan Nicholson 'Diggers learn a new language' *Age*, 17 April 1999, p. 21.

79 Ian Hunter 'Elite forces scouted island from April' *Sydney morning herald*, 11 October 1999, p. 11; Mark Dodd 'Militias: Australia points finger' *Sydney morning herald*, 10 June 1999, p. 8.

80 For example see Cotton *East Timor, Australia and regional order* pp. 96-97; Fernandes *Reluctant saviour* p. 114.

81 Robinson *East Timor 1999: crimes against humanity* pp. 236-247.



The murders did not abate because Indonesian forces had managed to eliminate all those they wanted dead. It was because around half the East Timorese population was already being deported, or else were hiding in remote regions of the territory.<sup>82</sup> The bigger towns, where militia could more easily target large numbers of civilians, were largely abandoned. Rather than attempt to hunt down the civilian population who had gone into hiding, the Indonesian forces concentrated on systemically destroying the territory's physical assets, in preparation for their departure. Nor were there mass killings of refugees in West Timor, although individuals continued to be targeted.

Interfet did not force the TNI or the militias to leave East Timor through military operations.<sup>83</sup> In Dili, Interfet allowed Indonesian forces to leave in their own time. In most other towns and regions, Interfet arrived to find that both the civilian population and Indonesian forces had already departed. 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.

By the end of September, there were over 4,200 Interfet soldiers in East Timor. Yet they had no presence in the bulk of the territory. Rather than establishing an immediate but smaller scale presence in multiple locations throughout the territory, overwhelming force was built up in centralised locations. Only then did troops gradually spread into the surrounding areas or begin to build up in another location.<sup>84</sup> Falintil became frustrated at the slow pace of this deployment, because Interfet did not seem to appreciate that the militia threat was rapidly abating.<sup>85</sup> In mid-October it was announced that the three eastern districts of East Timor were considered safe for travel by civilians, not because Interfet had any presence there, but because Falintil had made assurances that the militias were no longer a problem.<sup>86</sup>

Once Indonesia began leaving East Timor, the chief risk to human life was mass starvation and illness. But humanitarian aid seems almost to have been an afterthought in Interfet planning and, operationally, the delivery of aid always took second place to military 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).<sup>87</sup> What food was available in Dili was not distributed quickly enough,

82 See Robinson *East Timor 1999: crimes against humanity* pp. 42-44.

83 The following account is based primarily on Breen *Mission accomplished*; Ryan 'Primary responsibilities and primary risks'.

84 See David Dickens 'The United Nations in East Timor: intervention at the military operational level' *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23 (2) 2001. For criticisms of this strategy, see Irena Cristalis *Bitter dawn: East Timor, a people's story* Zed Books, London 2002, pp. 253-259.

85 'Peace force too slow, says rebel chief' *Australian*, 5 October 1999, p. 10.

86 Paul Toohey 'Safety declared as UN bows to Falintil advice' *Australian*, 18 October 1999, p. 10.

87 Bernard Lagan and Mark Dodd 'Aid drops suffer amid rapid military build-up' *Sydney morning herald*, 22 September 1999, p. 11; Janine Macdonald 'Delays frustrate aid staff' *Age*, 21 September 1999, p. 13; Max Blenkin 'Troops go into bandit country' *Courier-mail*, 28 September 1999, p. 4.

resulting in hungry refugees looting aid warehouses twice in the first week of the deployment.<sup>88</sup> International aid agencies were critical because Interfet did not rapidly extend its operations beyond Dili in the first two weeks of the operation.<sup>89</sup> A semi-official review of the deployment is critical of NGOs for their lack of organisation, but acknowledges that Interfet was largely reliant on them for the provision of aid.<sup>90</sup>

If Interfet arrived too late to prevent mass killings, it acted too slowly to bring a halt to deportations of the East Timorese population or physical destruction in the territory, which continued well after its arrival. The border region did not come under Interfet's control until nearly three weeks into the deployment. As Indonesian forces were allowed to retreat at their own pace to West Timor, or other Indonesian islands, they continued to take civilians with them.<sup>91</sup> Even in Dili, civilians were ushered onto boats from docks under the dual control of Indonesian and Australian troops.<sup>92</sup> No effort was made by Interfet to stop the deportations.

Finally, the prevention of physical destruction was certainly not a priority for Interfet. For days after Interfet arrived in Dili, Indonesian forces continued acts of arson. Australian forces were not authorised to stop this, merely challenging those caught in the act.<sup>93</sup> 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 and shipped out stocks of food aid.<sup>94</sup> Outside Dili, there was no interference in looting and arson at all. Again, the slow pace of Interfet's advance to the western border was a crucial factor, and the western regions suffered the most thorough destruction.<sup>95</sup>

Interfet failed to deliver on its humanitarian promise because its overriding priority was to maintain the Australian-Indonesian relationship. Open combat between Interfet and the Indonesian military had to be avoided, and clashes with the militia kept to a minimum. It was no accident that Australian troops entered territory from which their Indonesian counterparts had already departed, because their movements were in general coordinated. As Dickens writes,

88 Mark Dodd 'Rice stolen in midnight raid on warehouse' *Sydney morning herald*, 30 September 1999, p. 8.

89 Mark Dodd 'Critics talking rubbish, says Cosgrove' *Sydney morning herald*, 8 October 1999, p. 10.

90 Ryan 'Primary responsibilities and primary risks' p. 109.

91 Breen *Mission accomplished* p. 56; Taudevin *East Timor: too little too late* pp. 281-282.

92 Breen *Mission accomplished*.

93 Breen *Mission accomplished* pp. 56-58.

94 Breen *Mission accomplished* pp. 48-50.

95 Nevins *A not-so-distant horror* p. 102.

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.<sup>96</sup>

Maintaining relations with Indonesia nevertheless had to be balanced against the need to establish stability. Confrontations with Indonesian regular forces, even those clearly acting in concert with militia elements, were studiously avoided. Militia 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, because militia acting on their own posed a potential threat to this control. The clearest example is the operation to secure the border with West Timor. Although it took two weeks before it was launched, once underway it involved the airborne and amphibious deployment of 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.<sup>97</sup>

### **Australia abhors a power vacuum**

By September 1999 Australia could no longer rely on Indonesia to secure its interests in East Timor. The spectre of the 'Balkanisation' of the Indonesian archipelago haunted Australian policy makers. East Timor became the focal point for fears about an 'arc of instability', because it was seen as a potential trigger for a domino effect in which Aceh, West Papua or other 'restive provinces' would follow its example. As always, the ultimate concern was the possibility of major powers hostile to Australia, especially China, gaining influence in the region.<sup>98</sup> Australia therefore moved to avoid a destabilising power vacuum, which if left unchecked might ultimately have undermined its position of military primacy in the region. As White recollects,

it was recognised that if a major [intervention] 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.<sup>99</sup>

Indonesia's withdrawal from the territory was all but inevitable after the ballot, but it was far less clear how the transition to independence would unfold. Australia was initially 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

96 Dickens 'The United Nations in East Timor: intervention at the military operational level' p. 214.

97 Damien Kingsbury 'East Timor border security' in Damien Kingsbury (ed.) *Violence in between: conflict and security in archipelagic Southeast Asia* Monash University Press, Victoria 2005, pp. 277-278.

98 For explicit examples, see Geoffrey Barker 'Defence plan in no man's land' *Australian financial review*, 17 May 1999, p. 20; Paul Dibb 'Indonesia: the key to South-East Asia's security' *International affairs* 77 (4) 2001, pp. 830-834; Dupont 'The strategic implications of an independent East Timor' pp. 187-188; Greg Sheridan 'We can't risk losing our security edge' *Australian*, 14 August 1998, p. 25.

99 White 'The road to INTERFET' p. 4.

for Timorese Resistance), and might have achieved a stronger role in East Timor had the transition to independence been peaceful.

The Indonesian military's scorched earth policy dramatically changed this balance of power. In one sense, the destruction was not in Australia's interests, as a more chaotic transition could hardly be imagined. But the violence also provided an excuse for Australian intervention. The worst possible outcome for Australia would have been an East Timor in which there was no clear state power. For example, although Falintil might have secured most of the country, without Interfet's firepower the militias could have operated in the western border regions indefinitely. The instability feared by Australia would have been deepened and prolonged. Instead, the Australian military provided the hard foundation of armed force upon which the UN's transitional state in East Timor was constructed.

Moreover, the new nation was cast in the mould of Western liberal democracy; no 'failed state' or 'Southeast Asian Cuba' ensued. 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. The intervention allowed Australia, in the words of one East Timorese activist, to 'come as angels, to come as gods'.<sup>100</sup> Prior to this, as the most prominent international supporter of the Indonesian occupation, Australia's public image in East Timor could hardly have been worse. Popular gratitude for the Australian intervention meant its subsequent involvement in the territory was more politically acceptable.

Australian diplomacy was underwritten by financial aid. Spending on East Timor totalled around \$3.9 billion in the financial years 1999-2004. But the major component, nearly \$3.5 billion, was on Australia's military and police deployment. In comparison, spending on humanitarian aid over the period was a mere \$150 million, declining from a peak of \$75 million in 1999-2000 to \$35 million in 2003-04.<sup>101</sup> The focus of aid spending was, moreover, on strengthening the East Timorese state, particularly the military and police force. Poverty reduction, health and education were lower priorities. In 2002 A\$30 million was spent on 'governance' projects and \$40 million on police and justice, but only \$19 million on health and clean water, and \$15 million on education.<sup>102</sup> The Australian military was largely responsible for training East Timorese troops, at a cost of \$26 million, and

100 Cited in Damian Grenfell 'Nation-building and the politics of oil in East Timor' *Arena* 22 2004, p. 50.

101 Cotton *East Timor, Australia and regional order* pp. 135-136. See also Tim Anderson 'Aid, trade and oil: Australia's second betrayal of East Timor' *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 52 2003, p. 118.

102 AusAID *Aid activities in East Timor* 2006, <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/country/country.cfm?CountryID=911&Region=EastAsia>, accessed 2 June 2006.

Australia has also provided arms.<sup>103</sup> In 2003, \$40 million was allocated to police force training over four years.<sup>104</sup>

Australia expected to gain direct political influence from its aid expenditure. In 2004, a number of East Timor NGOs signed a statement criticising Canberra's policy on negotiating oil and gas rights. In retaliation, Australia cut its funding to one of the NGOs. Other organisations have had funding cut for similar reasons.<sup>105</sup> More subtly, NGO workers express concern that to obtain funding they are forced to accept the priorities of donor countries, but are unable to address more controversial issues such as national self-determination, political awareness or popular education.<sup>106</sup>

Despite the primacy of strategic concerns, Australian policy makers have also sought to maximise the economic benefits of the intervention. Australia has been a strong promoter of orthodox neo-liberal economic policies in East Timor, including the need for fiscal restraint, open trade and investment regimes and minimal state involvement in the economy.<sup>107</sup> These policies have often been promoted under the guise of 'good governance', which means prioritising private markets.<sup>108</sup> Canberra provided financial advisors to help draw up the 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 East Timor budgets and develop its taxation system.<sup>109</sup> Australia has also supported agricultural development based on cash crops, and opposed government controlled infrastructure development.<sup>110</sup> By 2007, Australia was the largest foreign investor in East Timor, along with Singapore.<sup>111</sup>

103 Cotton *East Timor, Australia and regional order* pp. 135-138; Mark Dodd 'Australia to lend new army 300 rifles' *Sydney morning herald*, 31 January 2001.

104 Cotton *East Timor, Australia and Regional Order* pp. 137-138.

105 Ellis, Peter 'Lying for your country' *New Matilda*, 30 May 2007, <http://newmatilda.com/2007/05/30/lying-your-country>, accessed 15 April 2010; La'o Hamutuk 'Australia [sic] aid should support Timor-Leste, not Australia's political interests' press release, 6 October 2005, <http://www.laohamutuk.org/reports/AusAID/FTM.html>, accessed 12 July 2007.

106 Anonymous NGO worker in East Timor, interview conducted Dili, 8 November 2007; Setyo Budi, Indonesian social activist working in East Timor, interview conducted in Dili, 8 November 2007; José Luis de Oliveira, East Timorese NGO worker with Yayasan Hak, interview conducted in Dili, 23 November 2007; Interview with Nuno Rodriguez.

107 See Anderson 'Aid, trade and oil: Australia's second betrayal of East Timor' pp. 116-117; Tim Anderson 'Independent development in Timor-Leste?' *Development bulletin* 68 2005, p. 71-72.

108 For examples see *Good governance: guiding principles for implementation* AusAID, 2000, p. 7; Paul Simons, Gayle Hart, and Cliff Walsh *One clear objective: poverty reduction through sustainable development* AusAID, 1997, pp. 4, 6.

109 Department of Foreign Affairs *East Timor in transition* pp. 162-163.

110 Tim Anderson 'Food security and agriculture in the Australia-East Timor relationship' in Damien Kingsbury and Michael Leach (eds) *East Timor: beyond independence* Monash University Press, Clayton 2007, pp. 186-189.

111 George Junus Aditjondro, 'From colony to global prize: Timor Loro Sa'e under a wave of economic transformation' *Arena magazine* 47 2000, pp. 22-23, 35-36; George Junus Aditjondro *Timor Loro Sa'e on the crossroad* Center for Democracy and Social Justice Study, Jakarta 2001, pp. 32-33; Department

The most prominent economic issue between Australia and the independent East Timor has been negotiations over the boundary line between the two countries, and hence the division of royalties from the exploitation of oil and gas deposits in the Timor Sea.<sup>112</sup> Space does not permit a full discussion. What is important here are the tactics used by Australia, which adopted a self-declared position of prioritising Australia's 'national interest',<sup>113</sup> and by refusing to allow the matter to be legally adjudicated shifted the field of negotiations decisively in its favour. Australia's position of economic strength was openly exploited by Foreign Minister Downer during negotiations, who at one point told Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri that 'We are very tough... Let me give you a tutorial in politics...'<sup>114</sup> During negotiations Australia also repeatedly referred to the 1999 intervention, a not so subtle reminder of East Timor's strategic weakness at a time when a bilateral defense agreement covering the Timor Sea was also under discussion.

A new agreement was signed in February 2006. Although gaining some concessions, East Timor still lost several billion US dollars in revenues to which it had laid claim, a sum greater than Australian aid to East Timor during the early years of independence.<sup>115</sup> The chief benefit of this arrangement for Australia is that it maintains the territorial status quo: no permanent border will be set with East Timor for a further 50 years, by which time oil and gas deposits in the region will have been exhausted.

## Conclusion: a success story for Australian imperialism

Although popular support did not force the Howard Government to intervene in East Timor, it was perfectly happy to exploit public sentiment to advance the cause of Australian imperialism. The intervention became the centrepiece of an increasingly militarised nationalism, in which Australia's armed might was celebrated as the

of Foreign Affairs and Trade *East Timor—country brief* [http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/east\\_timor/east\\_timor\\_brief.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/east_timor/east_timor_brief.html), accessed 16 July 2007.

112 The following account is based on Anderson 'Aid, trade and oil: Australia's second betrayal of East Timor' pp. 119-124; Tim Anderson 'Timor Leste: the second Australian intervention' *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 58 2006, pp. 63-67; Paul Cleary *Shakedown: Australia's grab for Timor oil* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest 2007; Cotton *East Timor, Australia and regional order* pp. 102-109; Alexander Munton *A study of the offshore petroleum negotiations between Australia, the U.N. and East Timor* PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 2006; Clive Schofield 'A 'fair go' for East Timor? Sharing the resources of the Timor Sea' *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27 (2) 2005, pp. 262-277; Schofield, Clive, and I Made Andi Arsana. 'The delimitation of maritime boundaries: a matter of 'life and death' for East Timor?' in Kingsbury and Leach *East Timor: beyond independence* pp. 67-85; Interview with José Teixeira.

113 Holmes, Jonathon 'Rich man, poor man', transcript, *Four Corners*, ABC Television, 10 May 2004, <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2004/s1142836.htm>, accessed 17 July 2007.

114 Cited in Tim Colebatch 'How they fooled us on East Timor' *Age*, 11 March 2003, p. 13.

115 Anderson 'Aid, trade and oil: Australia's second betrayal of East Timor' p. 123; Grenfell 'Nation-building and the politics of oil in East Timor' p. 48.

embodiment of shared national values and interests.<sup>116</sup> Soon after the intervention began, one newspaper gushed:

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.<sup>117</sup>

General Cosgrove was feted as the personification of Australian martial prowess.<sup>118</sup> He was promoted to Chief of the Army and then Chief of the Defence Force, and was named Australian of the Year in 2001. Cosgrove's popularity was used to rehabilitate the image of the Vietnam War, as the media emphasised his distinguished service in that conflict.<sup>119</sup> He featured in a beer commercial and received a standing ovation at a television awards ceremony.<sup>120</sup>

The political hay-making was aided by the uncritical support it received from previous long-term critics of the Howard Government. This included all the mainstream political parties, including the Greens.<sup>121</sup> A number of commentators and academics generally known for their critiques of the Howard Government also praised the East Timor intervention, including many who had condemned the Government's policy on East Timor up to the intervention.<sup>122</sup> Reverend Tim Costello commented that 'If conscription is

116 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* 20 2005, pp. 47-55.

117 'A nation salutes its brave' *Daily telegraph* editorial, 20 September 1999, p. 10.

118 For examples, see Mike Carlton 'General Peter for President' *Sydney morning herald*, 19 February 2000, p. 38; D.D. McNicol 'A champion emerges from East Timor's nightmare' *Australian* 3 January 2000, p. 6; Simon Pristel 'Soldier's soldier' *Courier-mail*, 2 October 1999, p. 24.

119 I owe this point to Tom O'Lincoln.

120 Peter Hartcher 'Australia's acid test at the bottom of the sea' *Australian financial review*, 14 October 2000, p. 9.

121 For example of the cross party support, see Peter Cole-Adams 'Look after your mates, Howard urges troops' *Sydney morning herald*, 20 September 1999, p. 14; Aban Contractor 'MPs join forces to support peacekeepers' *Canberra times*, 22 September 1999, p. 11.

122 For examples, see Burchill 'East Timor, Australia and Indonesia' p. 180; Anthony Burke *In fear of security: Australia's invasion anxiety* Pluto Press Australia, Annandale 2001, pp. 212-220; Robert Garran *True believer: John Howard, George Bush and the American alliance* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest 2004, pp. 55-58; Ann Kent 'Australia and the international human rights regime' in James Cotton and John Ravenhill (eds) *The national interest in a global era: Australia in world affairs 1996-2000* Oxford University Press, South Melbourne 2001, pp. 256, 276; Damien Kingsbury 'Conclusion' in Damien Kingsbury (ed.) *Guns and ballot boxes: East Timor's vote for independence* Monash Asia Institute, Victoria 2000, p. 185; Maley 'Australia and the East Timor crisis: some critical comments' p. 159; Robert Manne 'The Howard years: a political interpretation' in Robert Manne (ed.) *The Howard years* Black Inc, Melbourne 2004, p. 46.

necessary, it is now socially and politically acceptable,<sup>123</sup> while liberal commentator Phillip Adams argued for increased military might because

in the next century our region will be unstable and... a nation of 20 million people, predominantly white and preposterously wealthy, needs to have first-class armed services.<sup>124</sup>

Having secured popular support over East Timor, the Government was emboldened to pursue a more aggressive policy of military intervention in the South West Pacific. Just days after Australian forces landed in East Timor, *The Bulletin* magazine interviewed John Howard and declared 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...<sup>125</sup>

Howard subsequently claimed not to have used the word ‘deputy’, but the article accurately reflected his position that Australian armed forces must play a more overt role as the region’s policeman.

The new policy found its first official expression in the 2000 Defence White Paper, which argued that 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.<sup>126</sup>

Australia’s diplomatic, economic and military strength, it argued, must be deployed to remove sources of instability. 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’. 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. The line between such deployments and more conventional confrontations with regional competitors could easily become blurred. Ultimately, expanded armed forces would be needed to secure Australia’s position as the key power-broker in the Southwest Pacific.

Spending on defence rose (in real terms) from \$13.5 billion in 1997-1998 to \$19.6 billion in 2006-2007, halting a long term decline.<sup>127</sup> The popularity of the East Timor deployment

123 Cited in Richard Baker ‘National service gains support’ *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’ *Australian*, 14 September 1999, p. 15.

124 Phillip Adams ‘Day of the lap-dog is over’ *Australian*, 25 September 1999.

125 Fred Brenchley ‘The Howard defence doctrine’ *Bulletin*, September 28 1999, pp. 22-24.

126 Department of Defence *Defence 2000: our future defence force 2000*.



made increased military spending palatable in the electorate. One poll reported 57 per cent approval for a new 'East Timor levy' imposed by the Government to fund the intervention itself, in contrast to the majority who opposed the GST.<sup>128</sup> Even before the intervention began, an editorial in *The Australian financial review* realised the potential:

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.<sup>129</sup>

The new military capabilities were soon put to use. Between 2000 and 2007 Australia dispatched military or policing forces to the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Tonga. Australian officials also assumed government administrative roles in many of these countries, as well as in Nauru. Finally, in May 2006, Australian troops returned to East Timor, where they shored up the Ramos-Horta Government, which had replaced the elected Alkatiri Government after a military revolt. The 1999 intervention into East Timor heralded a new phase of a stronger, more self-confident Australian imperialism.

127 2004-2005 dollars. Raspal Khosa *Australian Defence Almanac 2006-2007* Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Barton 2006, p. 88.

128 Tony Wright 'Voters back Timor tax' *Age*, 7 December 1999, p. 1.

129 'Spending more makes sense' *Australian financial review* editorial, 15 September 1999, p. 18.

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