

Asia Pacific Policy Center

Recommended Citation

"Asia Pacific Policy Center", NAPSNet Special Reports, September 16, 1999,
<https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/asia-pacific-policy-center/>

September 16, 1999

This is the latest in an ongoing series of articles on the crisis in East Timor. This is an excerpt from an issue brief prepared by Douglas Paal for the Asia Pacific Policy Center.

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Asia Pacific Policy Center
September 9, 1999

Issue Brief:

APEC Meets: China/WT0 and East Timor Dominate the Agenda

East Timor could prove another difficult topic for the U.S. and Chinese presidents if killing continues and Indonesia still refuses to permit a U.N. force to intervene. China showed in Kosovo how determined it is to resist interference in a sovereign nation's affairs without a clear UN mandate. Our judgment, however, is that an impasse is growing less likely every hour. It is more likely that Indonesian army regulars will return calm to East Timor, and permit the UN to operate there, on a timetable dictated by Jakarta.

The loss of life and property in East Timor is tragic and devastating after a brave popular vote for independence from Indonesia. The people of East Timor have been at the receiving end of injustices for too many centuries for the world to stand by and let it happen again.

Disarray in Indonesia's political system, divisions within the armed forces, and the parlous state of the economy, however, make it impossible

to reach simple, clean decisions about how to deal with the East Timor crisis. Governments are forced to work with the highly imperfect levers of power that exist inside Jakarta. Foreign leaders face a Hobson's choice of pressing Indonesia hard for action to stem the violence in Timor and risking a backlash from patriotic Indonesians that could derail the democratization process now underway or taking a gentler course of persuasion that will be criticized as too weak under the circumstances.

Outside leverage on Jakarta is essentially financial, a mix of bilateral and multilateral aid. If the leverage is exercised and the funds cut off, the results could include a collapse of democracy, military coup, economic depression, and /or secession by rebellious provinces. Any and all of these outcomes would damage the stability and prosperity of Southeast Asia. And they would be unlikely to improve East Timor's lot. Foreign leaders hands are more tied than many editorialists understand.

There is reason to hope, however, that patience with Jakarta, combined with personal diplomacy and occasional public threats to withhold funds, will work in the end. In the army, Defense Minister Wiranto needs time to replace mutinous troops in East Timor with forces more loyal to his command. Former president Suharto left a legacy of a fractious armed force, unable to unite under a strong leader to challenge him. Now, Wiranto has to unify the divided military, and the East Timor crisis has come too soon on his calendar for doing so. Anticipation of troubles like this may have been part of the resentment felt by the military toward President Habibie for his unilateral decision to put the future of East Timor to an early vote.

Politically, President Habibie increasingly looks like a figure who will soon fade from the scene, although apparently he does not think so. Talk of a coup against him this week reflected a widespread belief that he bears responsibility for the mess in East Timor. The military knows, however, that a coup will only abort the democratic process in the midst of its gestation. It would lead to an instant cut-off of assistance and a downward spiralling economy.

If a coup is unthinkable, producing a new leadership is a prolonged process. Even after the People's Consultative Assembly chooses a new leader in or around November, that leader is likely to rest on a shaky coalition base. Consensus-building will take time and lead often to weak results. The political elite in Indonesia seems to recognize that East Timor should not be allowed to derail this important, risky process, but in the meantime East Timor will be managed as an issue by less than fully legitimate leaders with a demonstrated lack of leadership skills. They are stuck with this situation.

Making the best of the situation requires wily ministers who will appease the public's antiforeign and anti-UN mood, while undertaking the steps necessary to put the security of East Timor in safe hands. We believe Defense Minister Wiranto and Foreign Minister Ali Alatas possess these skills, but need a few more days to achieve their goals. After that,

they will still need to address the many unanswered questions about the interim arrangements for East Timor's transition to independence.

One feature of the current crisis that is little understood is how well-prepared the outside powers have been in comparison to the Indonesians. Unlike in Kosovo, where the U.S. finally had to take the lead from reluctant Europeans, Indonesia's neighbors are quite ready to help East Timor's transition. Australia pre-positioned thousands of troops and their supplies in Darwin to be ready to jump to Timor on short notice. New Zealand, Thailand and others are ready to contribute peace keepers, reducing the demands on Washington to technical and logistical support. This coalition of the willing is a tribute to the responsibility of the region's leaders.

Prepared by Douglas H. Paal

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org