

# East Timor and Asian Security

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East Timor and Asian Security

Wade Huntley and Peter Hayes1

The recent crisis in East Timor, sparked by the August 30, 1999, vote for independence and culminating in the introduction of the UN-sanctioned International Force for East Timor (InterFET), is not simply the latest chapter in East Timor's tragic history. The bloodshed and turmoil in East Timor have cast in stark relief the utter inadequacy of existing Asia-Pacific security arrangements to cope with regional crises, let alone enduring challenges. Moreover, the world's most recent brush with "ethnic cleansing" highlights the increasing importance of vital questions concerning the relationship of international security and human rights in the post-Cold War world.

US Responsibility

Although important questions remain concerning lines of authority in East Timor and in Indonesia, there is little doubt now that primary

responsibility for the killings of innocent civilians in East Timor in the wake of the referendum must be borne by the Indonesian military and the militia forces it sanctioned and supported. Nevertheless, to fully appreciate the nature of the international reaction to the crisis, it is also vital to highlight the history of international culpability in Indonesian repression in East Timor.

The principal bearer of such broader responsibility is the United States, which for decades has consistently prioritized its perceived national interest in resisting popular activism and preserving stability in Indonesia. Following this approach, the United States turned a blind eye to the massacre of Indonesians in 1965-66, signaling its willingness to tolerate the Indonesian military's gross abuse of international human rights standards. Accordingly, the United States tacitly accepted and surreptitiously supported Indonesia's 1975 invasion of East Timor following the end of Portuguese colonial rule. Although not explicitly condoning the invasion, Washington worked behind the scenes to subvert any meaningful United Nations efforts to restrain Indonesian bloodletting in the territory. Subsequent to this de facto validation of the invasion, the United States not only willingly overlooked a quarter-century of harsh Indonesian rule, but also effectively abetted this repression by helping arm and train Indonesian forces and by resisting efforts to focus international concern on the plight of East Timor's people. US reluctance to support UN preparations to prevent post-referendum violence is only the most recent example of this complicity.

As the post-referendum crisis unfolded, many US commentators stressed Indonesia's strategic importance to U.S. national interests. Yet many frequently cited factors, such as the strategic importance of Indonesian-controlled sea lanes, oil in the region, and the position of Indonesia as a middle-ranking power in the region, are simply artifice. For example, arguments based on the importance of the Malacca and/or Lombok Straits ignore the relative ease and small cost of using alternate sea lanes around Australia should turmoil in Indonesia lead to the closing of these routes.<sup>2</sup> Reliance on such justifications worked only to undermine US credibility among the Timorese and their supporters elsewhere in the region.

Some arguments as to the need for US caution in approaching this crisis do, however, have validity. In particular, there is a basis for the assertion that the United States has lost some of its capacity to exercise leverage over the players in Indonesia and East Timor, despite the apparent increase of its strategic capabilities. For example, long-standing intimate relations between US and Indonesian armed forces have waned of late. Although the Indonesian military continues to regard this relationship as symbolically important, its practical value has diminished. Ironically, each severed tie (such as the cessation of joint training exercises one week before the referendum) left one less tie that the United States could threaten to cut to coerce behavior it desired. Thus, the Clinton administration's suspension of all military contact with Indonesia (eventually exercised over Pentagon objections) may have

had much less impact than many asserted on the final decision to allow the peacekeeping force to enter East Timor and to pull out Indonesian troops.

At the economic level, Indonesia is dependent upon the United States and Japan for over US\$1 billion per month in credit from the IMF, World Bank and Asian Development Bank issued after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. This circumstance provided the United States and Japan with considerable leverage. However, this leverage was not easy to utilize as a policy instrument. The Indonesian military, directly responsible for the violent suppression of East Timor, would have been among the least affected segments of Indonesian society by a cutoff of this support. During the killing in September, therefore, neither the threat nor the implementation of an aid cutoff was as coercive of Indonesia's military leadership as many predicted. Indeed, wholesale economic penalization would have punished the country's civilian population for the actions of its military, regardless of the attitude most Indonesian citizens held on those actions. In the longer run, wielding this powerful but crude weapon risked undermining Indonesian economic recovery, increasing poverty, bankruptcy, and social stress, and making it even more difficult for the Indonesian political elite to accept moves toward democracy. This reality continues to reduce rather than expand American power over the Indonesian military's behavior in West Timor or elsewhere in Indonesia's far flung provinces.

Despite these limitations on US power, however, events have demonstrated that the United States sets the tone for the course of events in Indonesia and elsewhere in the region. Although initially reluctant to directly intervene in East Timor, President Clinton was forced to focus on the crisis at the APEC meeting in New Zealand, at which time Australia and other states held their strongest leverage on the United States to support an international peacekeeping force. Even in acquiescing to pressure from both domestic and international opinion, the Clinton administration issued only tepid criticism of Indonesian complicity in pre- and post-referendum violence. Nevertheless, following Clinton's direct criticisms, Indonesia quickly accepted an international force for East Timor, demonstrating its continuing sensitivity to US views. The international presence that has since taken shape under UN-mandate, which includes Australian and Korean troops, an offer of Chinese police, and a humanitarian deployment of the Japanese Air Self Defense Force in West Timor, certainly bears a US stamp of approval.

Two conclusions follow from these observations. First, although the exercise of US power in this instance was complicated, opportunities nevertheless existed for judicious and targeted action in support of the people of East Timor. For this reason, justifications of inaction on grounds that inadequate means of influence existed were as specious as justifications putting Indonesian stability ahead of the future of East Timor in US national interests.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the continuing centrality of the

United States to the outcome of the crisis exposed the abject inability of other states in the region to act in concert to play this role themselves. What has happened--and what will occur--in East Timor will have lasting effects on the course of security structures in the East Asia and Pacific region. The course of events is likely to raise the acceptable performance standard for Asian militaries with respect to gross violations of human rights. In this regard, developments have added to the post-Kosovo precedents concerning justifications for humanitarian intervention and hence are already globally relevant.

The absence of a pre-existing regional security apparatus capable of reacting quickly and effectively to the emerging crisis has already imposed costs on all the relevant actors, including the United States, Indonesia, and especially the people of East Timor. The ad-hoc cobbling together of the Australia-led multinational force, while a significant first in achieving broad regional commitment of personnel and funds, has not rectified this shortcoming.

#### Collective Regional Security -- ASEAN and the UN

As the violence in East Timor unfolded in the hours and days immediately following the referendum vote, it became apparent that forceful and speedy intervention to stop the killing was absolutely urgent. However, there was no international consensus on its form nor on how to implement it.

At the time, some argued that first responsibility properly belonged to the ASEAN member states, and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Walden Bello, for example, called upon ASEAN to move "immediately" to form the core of a UN peacekeeping mission.<sup>3</sup> Viewing US and Australian complicity with past repression of East Timor as too great a stain to be whitewashed, Bello asserted, "All commitments of armed peacekeepers to East Timor must be done under the mandate of the UN and ASEAN."

Although the force ultimately deployed received a UN mandate, the ASEAN states -- as a group or, for the most part, individually -- proved incapable of taking on a meaningful leadership roles. As Richard Tanter argued at the onset of the crisis, the ARF "has made no contribution to resolving the East Timor conflict in the past, and has little to offer now."<sup>4</sup> Unlike Europe with its tried and tested institutions for conflict avoidance and resolution, he argued, ARF has never addressed the violation of human rights as an interstate agenda item. Instead, the ARF and ASEAN set precedents earlier in relation to Burma that kept the standards of respect for human rights low rather than pushing them toward international norms. The non-governmental Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) process that parallels the ARF also has failed to address these issues. Thus, the region lacks basic institutions and procedures to address systematic governmental human rights abuses, especially when they arise in connection with "internal security" problems.

Subsequent events proved the accuracy of Tanter's diagnosis. As days passed, initiative to form a peacekeeping force fell by default to Australia and, behind it, the United States. Despite Indonesia's expressed desire for more active involvement by Asian neighbors other than Australia, those states proved fractious and contentious. Malaysia, despite its active role in past UN peacekeeping operations, reacted ambivalently as the crisis unfolded, and ultimately bowed out of InterFET's first phase of deployment in a pique after UN Secretary General Kofi Annan offered Thailand the role of second-in-command behind Australia. Thailand's own involvement has been a source of domestic tension, pitting its activist foreign minister Surin Pitsuwan against more traditional military and defense elites, and thus muddling somewhat the signal sent by Thailand's involvement. Although the Philippines has made a substantial troop commitment to InterFET, it too has blurred its message by joining China in opposing the UN Human Rights Commission vote to conduct an international inquiry into the East Timor situation.

In sum, ASEAN member states, individually and collectively, reacted to the crisis with contradiction and paralysis. A principal source of these vacillating postures was the resistance to pressures for action given by the prevailing norm among these states proscribing "interference in the internal affairs of other member states." Inaction and inertia were reinforced by the weakness of pre-existing mechanisms for policy coordination and joint action. Additionally, all these states -- like the United States -- have been historically very reluctant to endanger vital economic, political, and security relations with large and oil-rich Indonesia for the sake of opposing human rights abuses in small and poor East Timor.

The prospective consequences of ASEAN inaction are sweeping. The call to place an effective international peacekeeping force in East Timor presented the ARF with an opportunity to establish a future role for itself in resolving security dilemmas and other tensions in the region. The total inability of the ARF to seize this opportunity effectively ceded leadership to the United States, Australia, other allies and friends, and the large powers at the UN. Moreover, this inability also ended any notion that the ARF has political leadership in regional security dialogues, in relation either to Southeast Asia or to the Asia-Pacific region as a whole. In short, the ARF's capacity to function as the fulcrum for regional security coordination and dialogue has been crippled, and it is unlikely that the ARF or nascent regional institutions will regain any major role in security deliberations or outcomes in the near future. With no other meaningful autonomous security institutions on the horizon, the path is again clear for big powers to contend for hegemony in the region.

#### Hegemonic Regional Security -- The Role of Australia

In addition to the US role in the East Timor crisis, the role taken up by Australia also compels attention. In particular, the crisis presented a specific opportunity for Australian prime minister John Howard to

redefine Australia's historic approach to Indonesian relations in ways that will have significant impact on Australia's foreign policy and on regional security relations for years to come.

Ever since the fall of Singapore to Japan in 1942 demonstrated the limits of British security guarantees, Australia has faced a tension between its Western origins and its Asian geography. In foreign policy, this tension has meant seeking to balance ongoing links to Britain and the United States, on the one hand, and developing links to immediate neighbors, on the other. In this context, Australia's relations with Indonesia -- with its large population and abundant resources -- has been a central challenge to Australian policy-makers.

After the pro-Western Suharto regime took power in the mid-1960s, Australian policy-makers worked (with varying success) to maintain close ties to the regime, helping ameliorate Australia's underlying foreign policy tension at least with respect to Indonesia. In this context, Indonesia's occupation and repressive rule of East Timor was an unwelcome irritation. Although the Whitlam government condemned the invasion and Australia became home to many East Timorese independence activists, policy-makers then and after retained their perception of the importance of sustaining close ties to Jakarta.

Beginning in 1983, the Labour governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating increased efforts to improve Indonesia-Australia ties, and sought specifically to build ties to the Indonesian military. These efforts led in 1985 to Australia's formal recognition of East Timor's incorporation within Indonesia, and culminated with the December 1995 signing of the "Agreement on Maintaining Security" (AMS). The AMS, negotiated in secret and insulated from parliamentary oversight, sparked controversy. Supporters heralded the agreement for strengthening Australia's relationship to its most powerful neighbor, with beneficial effects for relations throughout the Asian region. Critics -- including opposition leader John Howard -- condemned wording in the AMS widely understood to oblige Australia to refrain from pressuring Indonesia on East Timor and other irredentist issues.

Within months of reaching the AMS accord, Australia's Labour Party lost power in national elections, and Liberal Party leader John Howard became prime minister. Although initially the new government affirmed support for the AMS, this approach vied with the party's historical aversion to Asian-oriented foreign policy. As time passed, rising turmoil in Indonesia -- the impact of the Asian financial crisis and the subsequent fall of the Suharto regime -- eroded perceptions of Indonesia's powerful position, engendering instead the specter of a disintegrating or "Balkanizing" region and raising questions as to the wisdom of emphasizing close ties to Jakarta.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the brewing crisis in East Timor presented Howard with a welcome opportunity for a dramatic break from his predecessors' approaches to relations with Indonesia.

With Indonesian President B. J. Habibie inching toward concessions on

East Timor, the Howard government decided to press the issue. On January 12, 1999, the Australian government proclaimed support for autonomy and an eventual vote on self-determination in East Timor, abrogating the implicit proscription entailed by the AMS.<sup>6</sup> Only fifteen days later, Habibie made his historic announcement that the East Timorese would be allowed to vote to choose, in effect, between autonomy and independence.

The Indonesian military's direct responsibility for the subsequent violence in East Timor demonstrated its rejection of Habibie's acquiescence to some form of East Timorese self-determination. Hence, the Howard government's decision to pressure Habibie on East Timor has met with criticism for failing to anticipate -- and perhaps even facilitating -- the Indonesian military's predictable response. However, the Howard government's motivations for pressing the issue at this time reached beyond East Timor itself. The deteriorating situation in East Timor also offered the Howard government an opportunity to put into action its pro-Western vision of Australia's future regional role, by adopting a more forceful position toward Indonesia and positioning Australia to play a prominent role in resolving the situation.

As violence in the province spread, and as previously-cultivated ties to the Indonesian military proved ineffective as a tool to induce its restraint, Australia became an early and active advocate of UN intervention. In the wake of the August 30 vote (in which 78% supported independence), the murderous and destructive rampage of TNI-supported pro-integrationist militias made immediate action paramount. In this context, with no coherent regional security structure in place to offer credible alternative authority, the UN Security Council approved the formation of InterFET under Australian leadership.

The broader opportunity and mandate with which the Howard government has viewed Australia's role in InterFET became clear with Howard's September enunciation of a new strategic doctrine. Howard's vision would have Australia not only adopt a more "active" role in Asian security matters, but do so as a "deputy" to the United States and a broader agenda of Western-oriented interests. The approach, quickly dubbed the "Howard Doctrine," clearly casts Australia's InterFET role not as a unique necessity, but as a model for the future. The doctrinal shift was accompanied by predictable calls for substantial increases in Australian defense spending to match the new activist role.

Some commentators have remarked that the "Howard Doctrine" represents a dramatic new orientation in Australia's approach to regional security relations. This observation holds only in regard to the extent to which the approach dispenses with efforts to accommodate Indonesia. In terms of the projected affinity with the United States, the approach taps a deep vein of thinking that has existed in Australia since the end of World War II. As the Cold War dawned, Australian defense planners sought specific security guarantees from the United States. Because the 1951 ANZUS treaty only partly satisfied these aims, many analysts have since avowed that Australian "loyalty" to the United States, both in the Asia-

Pacific and elsewhere in the world, would cement an affinity of interests that would secure US support in time of crisis. Howard's offer to have Australia act as "deputy" in the region (while the United States acts, presumably, as "sheriff" to the world) is simply the latest incarnation of this long-standing ambition among Australia's most pro-Western defense thinkers.

The Howard Doctrine, then, is an effort to take advantage of the crisis in East Timor to move away from reliance on collective security mechanisms and adopt a more militaristic and hegemonic role in regional security relations, with US backing. As a security policy for Australia, the deepest flaw in this approach remains what it has always been: US and Australian interests are not always convergent, and are not made more convergent merely by Australian fidelity. In the mid-1980s, when New Zealand's anti-nuclear policy threatened US nuclear weapons postures throughout the Asia-Pacific, Pentagon decision-makers did not hesitate to jettison New Zealand as an ANZUS partner. In 1999, the Howard Doctrine rests on the assumption that the United States will not subject Australia to a similar fate.

Such an assumption is enormously risky. Anti-Australian sentiment and violence has emerged throughout Indonesia, and relations with Australia's other northern neighbors have suffered. If the intervention in East Timor leads to direct conflict with the Indonesian military or indirect sparring via the militia, then the operation in East Timor could bring out instability orchestrated from Jakarta on the Irian Jaya-Papua New Guinea border -- Australia's worst military nightmare in many respects. In such a deteriorating relationship, the United States would have some very difficult choices to make between Jakarta and Canberra. There is no guarantee that the sheriff would support the deputy. Hence, for Australia, the East Timor situation is now extremely delicate and dangerous.

Conversely, successful cooperation between the Indonesian military and InterFET's forces to disband militias and repatriate refugees from West Timor could allow Australia the option of reconstructing its relationship with Jakarta in more positive ways. Such success would also work to reinforce the Howard Doctrine's premise of a de facto division of labor between Australia and the United States, wherein Australia would lead interventions into small hot spots threatening regional instability, while the United States would involve itself supportively and less overtly. Developing such a relationship might also help Australia push the United States to pay its UN dues, now in massive arrears and threatening the United Nations with bankruptcy. The InterFET intervention in East Timor gives Australia leverage on the United States for the first time, as Australia risks picking up a multi-billion-dollar tab for the cost of UN peacekeeping forces and administration over the coming years.

Nevertheless, even this more successful realization of the Howard Doctrine bodes ill for regional security outlooks more broadly. The



deputization of Australia will do little to relieve the onus of US hegemony that will inevitably follow heavy-handed unilateral actions in response to regional security turmoil. Instead, an aggressive proxy relationship of this nature is likely to aggravate Australia's relations with its immediate neighbors for years to come and undermine efforts to build genuine collective security mechanisms in the region. Only if Australia can parlay its self-defined role as US deputy into a lever capable of inducing greater active US support for building such mechanisms -- a very big "if" -- will the Howard Doctrine prove to be a positive contribution to regional peace and security.

#### Conclusion: The Imperative of Intervention

The need to end the reign of terror over the people of East Timor provided the strongest justification for constitution of InterFET. The imperative for intervention, in terms of the threat to human life and the social fabric of East Timor, was striking and clear.

The political clarity and potency of this imperative, in the face of traditional appeals to sterile definitions of national interest, highlights a critical new feature emerging throughout international relations: the pivotal role that can be played by civil society armed with new technologies of communication. The presence of many non-Indonesian witnesses to events in East Timor, including international civilians, activist groups and UN officials, made it impossible to conceal the massacres being directed from Jakarta. Access by independent eye witnesses to instantaneous communication media -- cell phones, satellite transmissions, Internet-based networking -- made it possible to generate widespread public awareness and conviction in "real-time;" that is, while such sweeping consensus could still make a difference. Appeals to abstract conceptions of security interest could not stand up to the force of sheer awareness of the underlying human realities. Public opinion forced the hands of the leaders of the great powers, who would have preferred to turn a blind eye to these realities and walk away from their consequences.

The importance of the role played by civil society and communication technologies is a new complexity characterizing the post-Cold War world.<sup>7</sup> Policymakers' choices are not quite so simple as they once were. The United States, in particular, can no longer simply trade off its commitment to promoting human rights for maintenance of its own security. Rather, these are now inextricable elements of a common problem. In the post-Cold War era, world politics is no longer easily segregated into "high" and "low" spheres, within the former of which only "hard interests" are relevant. Today, the human and civil rights status of individuals and groups at every level of political organization has become the most vital issue infusing international security throughout the world. Balancing justifications for humanitarian international action and respect for national sovereignty now presents the most vexing questions for contemporary international law.

In this sense, the crisis in East Timor is archetypical of the future. As international crises rooted in humanitarian concerns increasingly arise -- as they inevitably will -- concerned individuals will play ever-greater roles in bringing brutal realities to international audiences. Capable powers must then be prepared to react very rapidly in ways that maximize international support if they are to satisfy both the humanitarian imperatives and security challenges such crises will pose. Unfortunately, tens of thousands of East Timorese have had to pay with their lives for this lesson to be learned.

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The Nautilus Institute has responded to the urgent crisis in East Timor by compiling unique assessments and analyses by key experts from throughout the world, in an effort to promote and broaden debate over appropriate responses to the crisis. Many of these analyses were produced specifically for the Nautilus Institute. Between September 7 and October 25, 1999, the Nautilus Institute distributed over a dozen analyses, press releases and media overviews through the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network (NAPSNet); links to this material can be found online at [http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/sr/East\\_Timor/index.html](http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/sr/East_Timor/index.html). The institute will continue to solicit and disseminate analyses and sponsor related activities as long as the crisis continues. We welcome all responses to this endeavor.

1 Lyuba Zarsky, Tim Savage and Jason Hunter also contributed indispensably to the conception and argument of this article.

2 John Noer and David Gregory, *Chokepoints: Maritime Economic Concerns in Southeast Asia*, Center for Naval Analyses, National Defense University Press, Washington DC, 1996.

3 See Walden Bello, "East Timor: An ASEAN-UN Solution," NAPSNet Special Report 10, September 10, 1999, published at: [http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/sr/East\\_Timor/index.html](http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/sr/East_Timor/index.html)

4 Richard Tanter, "The East Timor Disaster," NAPSNet Special Report 1, September 7, 1999, published at: [http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/sr/East\\_Timor/index.html](http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/sr/East_Timor/index.html).

5 James Cotton, "East Timor and Australia: Twenty-five years of the policy debate," NAPSNet Special Report 18, September 21, 1999, published at: [http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/sr/East\\_Timor/index.html](http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/sr/East_Timor/index.html).

6 This announcement included revelation that Howard had written to Habibie the preceding December 19, urging support of this course of action.

7 See the essays on-line at <http://www.infoaxioms.org>, a study site maintained by the Nautilus Institute on the impact of new information technology on US foreign policy making.

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