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This is the latest in an ongoing series of articles on the crisis in East Timor. This article is by Admiral Michael McDevitt, a Senior Fellow at CAN Corporation in Washington.

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EAST TIMOR AND TEACHING LESSONS
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The chaos in the aftermath of the vote by the East Timorese for independence appears to be waning. Press commentary and informed speculation correctly place much of the blame for the violence and destruction of Dili on the Indonesian Army-- TNI (formerly known as ABRI)-- backed militia. Why would the Army allow itself to be so publicly and openly linked with activity that was certainly going to create an international hue and cry? Having permitted the people of Timor to vote for either continued association with Indonesia or for independence, there appears no question that Jakarta's interests were best served by ensuring the transition be as peaceful and stable as possible. The last thing a country that desperately needs foreign investment and investor confidence needs is international headlines describing violence and chaos, near ultimatums from the United States, the UN and Australia, and televised news that contradicts the pronouncements of the top leadership.

Why have TNI's attempts to restore order been so apparently feeble and

half-hearted? Has the Army leadership (GeneralWiranto) lost control? Or, is it simply a matter of TNI being inept and unable to control the militias they did so much to create and support? Or, was the Army leadership been more worried about the impact that East Timor's apparently successful bid for independence will have for the rest of Indonesia? I tend to believe that this is the primary reason why East Timor was allowed to suffer for so long.

When the "case study" of East Timor is accomplished it will almost certainly identify a number of contributing factors to the current tragedy. Certainly poor control is probably a reality. Territorial troops in any military culture are suspect when ordered to act against what they understand as their own best interests. The fact that the ethnic East Timorese units of TNI in East Timor will be losers in an independent East Timor is a factor. The relatively low level of military proficiency of much of TNI is also true. So too is the frustration of TNI over having essentially failed in East Timor. After over twenty-years they have been unable to create an environment on East Timor that makes continued union with Indonesia more attractive than the vagaries of independence.

Another factor that cannot be ignored is General Wiranto's belief that the Army is central to Indonesia's future stability. In the wake of the fall of Soeharto and the decisions to reduce the military's role in business and politics, Wiranto has focused on holding the Army together. That meant in practice allowing some of the hard-liners regarding East Timor to support the militias and to try to influence the vote through intimidation. But that attempt failed; as one suspects Wiranto anticipated, although perhaps not as one-sided as Army high command expected.

While these are all relevant to understanding why events unfolded as they did before the election, why didn't Jakarta clamp down after the election? Another factor, arguably the most important, has to be considered. From the perspective of TNI, and probably General Wiranto, the most important aspect of East Timor's successful "secession" from Indonesia is the example it sets for other separatist movements in Indonesia; especially Aceh.

Because it is almost impossible now to roll back the separation of East Timor, the important point for TNI is to "teach a lesson" to other separatists groups what the consequences of secession would be. If, as the press has reported, TNI essentially pursued (is pursuing) a scorched-earth policy in East Timor, the objective is less vengeance than sending a clear message to Acehenese and other erstwhile separatists movements that total destruction would be a price that TNI would be willing to extract to prevent separation. This crude and cruel, but often effective, approach has many antecedents in military history--Sherman's march to the sea in 1864 is but one example from our history. The Chinese have a folk saying or "chengu" that captures the concept; "kill the chicken to scare the monkey."

Not wanting to encourage other separatists also accounts for Jakarta's stalling for so long before permitting a UN peacemaking, or peace enforcing, force to intervene. Certainly considerations of national pride were involved, but also the precedent-setting nature of such an intervention for future separatist problems was probably the decisive consideration for Jakarta. If separatists throughout Indonesia can convince themselves that in the end the UN will come riding to their rescue, it makes compromise with Jakarta less likely, and the prospect of future troubles throughout the archipelago higher.

The reluctance of Jakarta to promptly stop the violence in East Timor has to be understood in the larger context of Jakarta's concerns about East Timor being the first step in the dismemberment of Indonesia. Arguably, early assurances aimed at assuaging Indonesian concerns about the implications of the erstwhile "Clinton Doctrine" of humanitarian intervention in support of future separatist movements might have been an important step in restoring stability to East Timor. The fact is however, that US policy makers have always been reluctant to reduce future options and flexibility by taking anything off the table. Nor could they, for good reason, appear to give Jakarta a green light in future dealings with other separatists. The reality is that the violence only died down when Jakarta was persuaded that the "lesson" has been adequately communicated, and the UN permitted to enter East Timor only after the damage was done.

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