

The East Timor Disaster: A Failure of Asian Security

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The following is the first in a series of analyses on last Friday's independence vote in East Timor, and the resulting violence by paramilitary groups. This article is by Richard Tanter, Professor of International Relations at Kyoto Seika University, Japan, who has written widely on Indonesian politics and East Timor.

I. The East Timor Disaster: A Failure of Asian Security

Richard Tanter
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The immediate cause of the catastrophic consequences of the UN ballot for independence in East Timor is undoubtedly the determination of the Indonesian armed forces [ABRI] to retain control of Indonesian politics prior to the upcoming presidential election. But without doubt East Timor represents the latest - but by no means the last - failure of Asian regional security arrangements.

By arming the militias in East Timor and encouraging them to rampage and kill, ABRI is making three things completely clear. Firstly, ABRI cares not a jot for the authority of President Habibie: on the matters ABRI considers crucial, there has been no reformasi in Indonesia. Secondly, while Indonesia is the world's largest financial beggar after Russia, the good opinion of the rest of the world, and Indonesia's creditors in particular, is equally without value to ABRI: Indonesia's agreed international obligations do not bind its armed forces. Thirdly, ABRI is

using the violence of its East Timorese contras to send a message to the rest of Indonesia, and to the oil-rich province of Aceh in particular: "this is what the rest of you can expect if you continue to oppose us".

In these circumstances, it is pointless to expect ABRI to willingly provide the security in East Timor it has so signally failed to provide before the ballot. Indonesia will not respond to UN requests for good behaviour. Only one lever will countermand ABRI's virtual decapitation of the Habibie administration: concerted US and Japanese notice that Indonesia's lifeline of credit amounting over \$1 billion a month from the IMF, World Bank and Asian Development Bank is in immediate jeopardy.

Resumption of foreign loans must be made conditional on ABRI calling off the contras in East Timor, fully implementing the transition process agreed in the May 5th Agreement with the UN and Portugal, and agreeing to cooperate fully with foreign peacekeeping forces. But even if Indonesia agrees in principle, where are these peacekeeping forces to come from?

There are three alternatives, each of which has serious problems: the United Nations; some other multilateral force; or a unilateral intervention. After such a decisive vote for self-determination, a United Nations Peace Keeping Force for East Timor is clearly the most desirable outcome. Yet the costs of an undoubtedly long-running UN military commitment is, as Indonesia well knows, prohibitive for the United Nations, which is owed more than US\$1 billion by the United States. Countries like Britain, Australia and New Zealand who have been calling for UN intervention must at the same time deal with the issue of financing a long-term UN force.

A Japanese role at the UN would be crucial here: not only could Japan take a financial initiative, shaming the United States, but it could demonstrate an as yet little seen capacity for regional leadership. More importantly, the Japanese government could gain domestic credit by offering a Japanese contingent. While suspicion of the government's Peace keeping Operations Law is still widespread, the clearly urgent need for UN forces in East Timor would provide a good example of a genuinely peace-oriented foreign role for the Self Defense Forces.

If there were a region-wide security body with both competence and legitimacy to intervene, a multilateral regional force could be effective. Yet despite its membership of 22 nations, the ASEAN Regional Forum [ARF] has made no contribution to resolving the East Timor conflict in the past, and has little to offer now. Unlike the more sophisticated and tested Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE], ARF has made no attempt to deal with member states that violate basic international standards of human rights. Moreover, ARF has no effective crisis procedures. OSCE as a regional arrangement of nations under the UN Charter has a legitimacy and an institutional capacity as yet lacking in East and Southeast Asia international organizations.

Only neighbouring Australia and the United States have the capacity - and

interest - to engage in go-it-alone peacekeeping operations in East Timor. Given the recent record of the US in Somalia and in NATO clothing in Kosovo, and the growing Northeast Asian pressures to which the US is a party, unilateral intervention by the US would be unhelpful. And Australia faces two severe obstacles. Firstly, as the only significant government to recognize Indonesia's invasion of East Timor, Australia presents an ambiguous face to the East Timorese pro-independence majority. Secondly, any primarily Australian peacekeeping presence in East Timor will always be hostage to the Australian government's often demonstrated desire to not cross Jakarta on security issues. Nationalist politicians - and there is almost no other sort in Indonesia - are already feeding a blinkered public opinion with tales of betrayal by the UN and Australia.

The hard fact is that final responsibility for the present crisis resides in Washington and Tokyo. Looking at the now-disgraced Suharto dictatorship through Cold War glasses allowed the US to avert its eyes from the deaths of hundreds of thousands in East Timor and Indonesia proper over three decades. Japan, together with the US, bought the oil and supplied the key foreign aid and investment that gave ABRI the freedom to ignore both law and decency.

The Clinton and Obuchi administrations equally now have every reason to force General Wiranto and ABRI to accept the voice of the ballot in East Timor, and to secure a measure of rule of law before the incoming Indonesian president becomes an otherwise inevitable hostage to the military. In the context of the Aceh rebellion, and an Indonesian economy still reeling from the currency crisis of 1998 more than any other country Asia, ABRI's lawlessness has disturbing implications for the stability and security of the region well beyond East Timor.

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