



# Windows of Opportunity

East Timor and Australian Strategic  
Decision Making (1975–1999)

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Wing Commander, Royal Australian Air Force



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***East Timor and Australian Strategic Decision Making***  
***(1975–1999)***

ANGUS L. PORTER  
Wing Commander, Royal Australian Air Force

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## **About the Author**

WGCDR Angus L. Porter is a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) pilot. After completing Pilot's Course in 1999, he was posted to 10 Squadron at RAAF Edinburgh, where he qualified as an AP-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft pilot. During a five-year posting at 10 Squadron, Wing Commander Porter conducted operational deployments in support of border protection operations as well as Australian Defence Force operations in the Middle East. In 2004 he was selected as aide-de-camp to the governor-general. In 2005 he was posted to 34 Squadron in Canberra as a VIP Operations Pilot. Promoted to squadron leader in 2007, he remained at 34 Squadron as a flight commander until 2010. Wing Commander Porter completed a staff tour at the Directorate of Personnel–Air Force, before attending the USAF Air Command and Staff College in 2012–13 and the USAF School of Advanced Air and Space Studies in 2013–14.



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## **Abstract**

This study comprises an analysis of Australia's involvement in the 1975–99 East Timor crisis. Using a realist lens to analyze international decision making, this study examines how global and regional power dynamics have influenced Australia's pursuit of the national interest. Specifically, the study addresses the question: Why did Australian support for military intervention in East Timor take 25 years to develop?

To answer the question, the paper is divided into three key periods of East Timorese history: the 1975 Indonesian invasion, the Cold War era (1976–89), and the post–Cold War era (1989–99). These periods cover major shifts in great-power dynamics and significant changes in Australia's strategic outlook. More specifically, they represent periods of Australian dependence on great-power patronage and periods where Australia leveraged national power to alter the direction of Southeast Asian security.

The study concludes that hegemonic behavior is the primary influence in Southeast Asia. From 1975 to 1999, a US-backed Indonesian government brutally dominated East Timor, while Australia looked on with complicity. While initially condemning the Indonesian invasion, Australia understood it lacked the capacity to intervene successfully in the crisis. A succession of prime ministers then chose pragmatism over confrontation, pursuing improved strategic and economic ties with Indonesia. This trend continued for more than two decades until the Asian financial crisis shifted regional dynamics, opening a window of opportunity for Australia to intervene in East Timor.



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The 2013 *Australian Defence White Paper* stated that, “Australia has a strategic interest in an international order that restrains aggression.”<sup>1</sup> This interest is especially evident in the Asia–Pacific region. Australian military involvement in Korea, Vietnam, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Malaysia, Indonesia, Iraq, and Afghanistan supports this assertion. However, following the 1999 United Nations (UN) East Timor intervention, reports regarding the immediate success of the mission concealed the two-and-a-half decades of inaction preceding the deployment. In those decades, approximately 250,000 East Timorese, or roughly one-third of the population, were killed.

The 1999 UN mission ended one of the world’s most horrific per-capita abuses of human rights. Those involved in the mission were rightly applauded for their efforts, and the mutual admiration between Australia and the UN was justified within the context of ending Indonesian atrocities in 1999. This paper, however, investigates the decades of neglect prior to 1999, asking why Australia—with a record of defending freedom, democracy, and human rights—ignored East Timor’s security for so long. Specifically, it addresses the question: Why did Australian support for military intervention in East Timor take more than 25 years to develop? The paper is divided into three key periods of East Timorese history: the Indonesian 1975 invasion, the Cold War era (1975–89), and the post–Cold War era (1989–99).

A realist lens is used to assess the international relations that influenced the Australian strategy for East Timor. To aid the analysis, a set of criteria is applied to the three key periods of East Timorese history. These criteria address Australia’s capacity to influence other states, provide solutions to international problems, and subsequently execute military operations in support of those solutions. Drawing on this analysis of Australia’s decision making from 1975 to 1999, the conclusion is offered that Australia had no capacity to influence the East Timor situation until 1999. As the Australian government continues to manage a multitude of Southeast Asian relationships and alliances, it is worth reflecting on how international relations have affected Australia’s options in the past, particularly in strife-torn Asia–Pacific nations such as East Timor.

The primary limitation of this analysis is the single case study used to derive broad conclusions regarding Australian decision making. While a single case study normally offers only limited analytical material, the 25-year duration of the East Timor crisis compensates for lack of diversity. The East Timor crisis

## INTRODUCTION

spanned decades of shifts in the international-relations environment: the Cold War, the end of the Vietnam War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the collapse of the Soviet Union that brought about the end of the Cold War, and the international interventions in the 1991 Iraq War, Kosovo, and Bosnia. The analysis is focused primarily on the international relations among Indonesia, the United States, and Australia, using the East Timor situation to focus the analysis. The timeframe covers the policies of two Indonesian presidents, five Australian prime ministers, and five US presidents. Their interactions highlight the dynamic nature of international relations, and their global policies reinforce the conclusions of the East Timor study. In sum, despite the case study being singular, the conclusions regarding Australian decision making are strengthened by the duration of the East Timor crisis (1975–99).

One assumption of this case study is the presumption regarding key players in the crisis. Within the UN construct, there were dozens of countries attempting to influence the East Timor situation. However, this analysis focuses on the United Kingdom, the United States, Portugal, Australia, Indonesia, and the institutions of the UN and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). There were many more influences, including several African nations experiencing their own forms of decolonization. The Japanese government lobbied heavily in the UN for East Timor's right to self-determination and, in 1999, participated in their first offshore military operation since World War II. In all, many countries were influencing the East Timor situation. The countries selected for this analysis are, in my opinion, the major players involved in shaping the outcome.

This analysis and assessment utilizes the realist lens to explain the interactions between states. Realism, liberalism, and constructivism are all valid tools with which to analyze international politics. All the approaches are useful, and all have their limitations. The realist lens, however, best explains the dominant behavior of the Indonesians and Americans. Additionally, the weakness of the UN in this case study suggests Hedley Bull was correct: institutions follow a pattern of behavior sustaining the primary goals of the biggest players.<sup>2</sup> It is evident that between 1975 and 1999, the UN's determination to intervene in East Timor was no match for Indonesia's ability to resist the institution. The UN has its purpose, but in the international system there is no higher power than the state.

Finally, applying the three assessment criteria to additional case studies may draw more robust conclusions regarding Australian decision making. Examining past operations such as the Malayan Emergency (1948–60), Konfrontasi (1963–66), or possible future confrontations such as West Papua would be a



worthy research project in its own right or offer a potential area for expanding this analysis.

### Notes

1. Department of Defence, *Defence Force White Paper: 2013*, Australian government white paper (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2013), 26, [http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/2013/docs/wp\\_2013\\_web.pdf](http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/2013/docs/wp_2013_web.pdf).
2. Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 4th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 8.



## Chapter 2

# Theoretical Foundations

## International Relations Theory

The case presented here follows a long-standing pattern in international relations. A full exposition of this pattern, and my interpretation of it, informs the analysis that follows. Neorealist and neoliberal theorists agree that states exist in a system of international anarchy, differing only in their solutions to the problems of anarchy. Within this anarchy, realists assert that states pursue self-interest, relentlessly seeking opportunities to increase their power relative to others. There is no recognized higher authority to govern them peacefully or provide them with security. Institutions such as the UN are established by powerful states for the benefit of powerful states. Hegemons know that institutional laws and norms, even when enforced upon themselves, will extend their power in the long run. Smaller states participate because being on the outside is worse than not participating at all. Subsovereign institutions may have collective security attributed to them; however, they are just the first port of call in great-power diplomacy. For example, South Korea and Kuwait exist in their present form due to US-led UN action. Would they exist without the UN? If we accept that great powers decide the outcome of international engagements, then the answer is yes. The United States demonstrated this great-power phenomenon in 2003. When a suitable UN resolution failed to materialize, US president George H. W. Bush (1989–93) declared, “Reliance by the United States on further diplomatic and other peaceful means alone will [not] . . . adequately protect the national security of the United States.” Failing to garner the support of the UN, Bush subsequently organized a *coalition of the willing* for the invasion of Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

Great powers control international decision making. This realist view, outlined by Robert Gilpin in *War and Change in World Politics*, states that, “In every international system the dominant powers . . . organize and control the processes of interactions among the elements of the system.”<sup>2</sup> John Mearsheimer, citing Immanuel Kant, takes this one step further, “It is the desire of every state, or of its ruler, to arrive at a condition of perpetual peace by conquering the whole world.” Mearsheimer argues this guarantees survival, and survival is the main game.<sup>3</sup> This explains why states dominating the system continue to strive for more power and why small states have aspirations beyond their stations. Power is national interest at the innate level: every state

is compelled by the desire to survive and then thrive. All states understand this; the more powerful they are, the more likely they are to succeed. A state's quest for power is therefore relentless.

Power is also how states differentiate their capabilities. Power is the sum of military strength and economic potential, but it is relative. For example, the military and economic strength of the United Kingdom in 1880 was enormous. One hundred years later, in the midst of the Cold War, this strength had increased enormously in both economic and military terms. Notwithstanding, the comparative expansion of the Soviet Union and the United States had overtaken it, rendering the United Kingdom's great-power status obsolete. States are sensitive to these relative changes in power because it alters their chances of survival and prosperity.

Power represents the potential of a state—the capabilities it has or is likely to acquire in the future. Gilpin believes that power is the “probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.”<sup>4</sup> The key term here is *resistance*. The state with greater power can overcome the resistance of another. It will do this by using force or the threat of force.<sup>5</sup> Gilpin also argues that a reputation for maintaining power leads to *prestige*—where resistance is unlikely. *Prestige* is the “probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons.”<sup>6</sup> Prestige is generally what great powers use to influence the international system; they seldom encounter resistance from smaller powers, and rarely need to exert force.

Today, there are over 190 countries striving for more power than they have. Great powers seek the prize of global hegemony because they believe it within their reach. These powers will strive for this prize until the costs of doing so become prohibitive and their countries go into decline. The collapse of the Roman Empire and disintegration of the Soviet Union are examples of this phenomenon. Small powers do not seek hegemony, at least in the short term. Such an overreach risks squandering the limited power they have managed to accumulate and retain; however, small powers continue seeking more power than they have.

Great powers dominate and stabilize the international system by using a combination of power and prestige, complemented with force. They determine the outcome of all conflicts by involvement, ambivalence, or indecision. When great powers are indecisive, it is usually due to ambivalence or indifference. No small power goes to war without first checking what the regional great power thinks.<sup>7</sup> Prior to World War II, for example, this *check* was complicated for small powers in Europe as there were five great powers to consider: Britain, France, Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

After World War II, this process became simplified down to two. The collapse of the Soviet Union reduced it to one.

Great powers determine outcomes in international conflict. They do not, however, make decisions in a vacuum. Their decision making is affected by the smaller powers around them. The meddling behavior of over 190 countries striving for power alters the cost-benefit calculus for a given great-power transaction. Small states alter this calculus inadvertently or intentionally through their diplomacy. Great powers will always act in their national interest; however, the actions of small states can alter great-power assessment of national interest.

Power is relative; however, the ability of small states to leverage results through diplomacy means power is also relational. When pursuing their self-interest, small powers know that judiciously leveraged diplomacy with a great power will influence the outcome. The closer the relationship between the small and great power, the greater is the potential to influence the outcome. A simple example highlights this. Two small powers in a region have equal power: countries A and B. There is one great power in the region. If country A is considering influencing country B with power, prestige, or force, then the great power will need to make a decision regarding its behavior. The great power will either support country A, remain indifferent, or support country B. Country A will *check* what this position is. If country A is supported, it will be victorious. If the great power is indifferent, the situation becomes a regional struggle between countries A and B.

At any stage, players in the regional struggle may use diplomacy to influence the great power's decision. In this case, the small country with the greatest *relational* power or status will exert the most influence on the great power. For example, it may argue a previous alliance or coalition participation deserves reciprocation or that the regional security environment affects the great power's global policies. In all cases, small powers will only influence the checking process when the great power is undecided. This may be a period *before* the great power has decided to support an action, or it may be an enduring period where the great power remains ambivalent or indifferent. In a region with one dominant great power, the ability to use diplomacy to move that great power away from its indecision will ultimately decide victory.

By influencing the checking process, the small power binds the great power to its self-interest. This binding has multiple benefits, helping determine the outcome of the struggle and lowering the costs of fighting it. The use of binding power, however, represents a diplomatic gamble. The great power may disengage at any point, including during a conflict, with disastrous consequences. South Vietnam experienced this when binding US power to fight North Vietnam.

Further, when outside power is sourced, the inclusion may unexpectedly escalate a regional conflict. In 1950 South Korea used US power to repel its northern invaders. The Korean War subsequently escalated into a small-scale hegemonic conflict, as Chinese and Soviet forces entered the fray and clashed with the US military.<sup>8</sup>

If a conflict is based on preexisting cleavages along ideological, ethnic, or religious grounds, the inclusion of borrowed power may also divide the region. Israel's Six-Day War (1967), War of Attrition (1969–70), and Yom Kippur War (1973) began as conflicts between Israel and Egypt. During the conflicts, Syria entered the fray on the Arab side, and the Soviets unexpectedly intervened to counter US-supplied Israeli air superiority. These cases reinforce the notion that when considering binding power to a national interest, the potential for regional escalation must be weighed with rigor before accepting the responsibility and inherent risk.

### **Small-Power Strategy**

All states have the same goals: pursue self-interest and acquire power. Small powers encounter two problems when pursuing more power: they lack the power to impose their will on the international system, and they must promote their national interest within an environment established and controlled by greater powers. Since great powers dominate the international system, small powers often have only fleeting opportunities to influence international relations.

To be successful, small powers can attempt to align a great power's national interest with their own. Israel is good example. The establishment of the state of Israel realigned US self-interest in the Middle East. States in the region understand that a coordinated attack on Israel will result in US power entering the region on behalf of Israel. Binding power is a difficult process but is worth the diplomatic investment if the short-term added power facilitates long-term benefits.

Binding power is a diplomatic art that enjoys varying degrees of success. In 1940 pleas from Britain for US involvement in Europe initially failed. At this point in the war, US isolationism was in America's national interest—thus, not aligned with British national interest. Not until Nazi Germany looked poised to become the regional hegemon—after the fall of Poland, Denmark, and Norway—did the US attitude move away from isolationism and toward *indecision*. Subsequently, when Germany showed the potential to dominate Europe, US national interest moved toward containing this potential hegemon.

With the fall of the Low Countries and France, the United States began to supply Britain and the Soviet Union with massive amounts of war-making materiel. The attack on Pearl Harbor then realigned US national interest with British national interest. It is not surprising that on hearing the Pearl Harbor news British prime minister Winston Churchill was jubilant, believing Britain would now win the war.<sup>9</sup>

In 2014, little has changed. The opposition in Syria, for example, wants to bind great power to remove the Bashar al-Assad regime. Its pleas are falling on deaf ears. Why? No great power has a clear interest in any particular outcome. When the great powers remain ambivalent, the small powers fight on their own and continue to argue why supporting their cause will satisfy a great power's self-interest.

For small powers, three key criteria influence the achievement of great-power support. These criteria are: (1) the capacity to *realign* established great-power policy with small-power national interest, (2) presenting viable *solutions* or plans to effectively pursue this interest, and (3) the capacity to *execute* combat missions in support of those solutions. The first two criteria are essentially diplomatic—arguing the case and offering a solution. The last criteria focuses on military capabilities—the reputation of the small power for using force. In other words, what great-power military contribution will be required to support the solution—a small UN or coalition contribution or unilateral provision of tens of thousands of troops? A failure to adequately meet the criteria places a burden on the request and reduces the likelihood of great-power participation. If all three criteria are satisfactorily met, borrowed power is likely to be realized.

This process was evident in the diplomatic and military situation in Southeast Asia in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Between 1975 and 1999, the US position on the Indonesian invasion of East Timor moved from support of Indonesia in 1975 to condemnation of Indonesia in 1999, culminating with US backing of an Australian-led intervention in support of the East Timorese. As a result of this reversal, East Timor, which lost its independence in 1975, regained it in 2002. This paper comprises an investigation into why this reversal occurred, what role Australia played, and ultimately, why Australian support for military intervention in East Timor took more than 20 years to develop.

## Historical Overview: East Timor

The story of the East Timorese is a centuries-old struggle for independence. The eastern half of the Timor Island came under Portuguese colonial

rule in 1701; however, the island had long been the scene of imperial rivalry in the region. Well known for its natural resources, Timor had long been integrated into Asian trading networks that were commercially tied to India and China.<sup>10</sup> East Timor's economic value had transformed it into a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century battleground among Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, and English imperialists. The Dutch managed to drive all their rivals out of the eastern archipelago except for the Portuguese, who maintained a foothold in East Timor. The East Timorese fought all their invaders, as well as anyone supporting the invaders through the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The fight for independence is the story of East Timor.

The Portuguese Empire was the first to claim the eastern side of Timor. The empire encompassed what are now 53 different sovereign states. By the sixteenth century, the Portuguese had established colonies along the African coast, the Middle East, India, and Asia, making them a powerful people. Both the Dutch and the Portuguese maintained weak holds on their respective sides of Timor for centuries, continuing their dispute until The Hague Court drew a border between the empires in 1913—the Portuguese retaining the small enclave of Oecussi in the west and the islands of Atauro and Jaco.<sup>11</sup>

The East Timorese are a unique population in a huge archipelago. Portuguese influence and geography shielded the local population from the Javanese/Islamic principles to the west and north. Today, Indonesia is the most populous Muslim nation on earth, yet neither Hinduism nor Islam reached the remote Portuguese side of Timor Island.<sup>12</sup> Under Portuguese rule, the East Timorese had been mostly animist; however, during the Indonesian occupation the Catholic Church became a place of refuge from Muslim oppressors. By the time international help arrived in 1999, more than 80 percent of the population classified themselves as Christians.<sup>13</sup> Today, that number is approximately 98 percent.<sup>14</sup> There are also few similarities between the language of Bahasa Indonesia and the commonly spoken Tetum language of the East Timorese.<sup>15</sup> Differences in the style of Dutch and Portuguese colonial rule meant the gap between colonial cultures was substantial. The two sides of Timor Island had little interaction; they were different provinces and different people. For hundreds of years, the divisive effect on Timor Island's population was evident to anyone visiting.<sup>16</sup>

By the start of the twentieth century, East Timor was a neglected colonial outpost. The Portuguese did little to develop East Timor, and prior to World War I, it was considered the most economically backward colony in the region. World War I left Portugal in a dire economic position, and it was surprising Lisbon managed to maintain its East Timor outpost at all. By the start of



World War II, East Timor's capital, Dili, had no electricity, no water supply, no paved roads, no telephone service, and no wharf for handling cargo.<sup>17</sup>

Allied strategy during World War II shattered the fragile nation of East Timor. When war was declared against Japan, the Allies used the island as part of a defensive line against Japanese movement south. Allied troops combined with Timorese soldiers defending both sides of Timor against the invading Japanese. In all, the Japanese attack and occupation killed an estimated 60,000 East Timorese, at times pitting the Timorese recruited by the Japanese against Timorese recruited by the Allies.<sup>18</sup> As had happened so often, the Timorese were caught in a struggle between global powers, suffering horrific humanitarian consequences.<sup>19</sup>

Australia's role in the Timor campaign was initially successful, due in part to the selfless contribution by the Timorese locals. The Japanese landed over 20,000 troops on the island. They fought against a small Allied force that, aided by the Timorese, fought the Japanese advance for 12 months before overwhelming numbers forced the Australians to evacuate the island. As former Australian consul to East Timor, James Dunn explains, the Japanese then took vengeance on the East Timorese, "In areas where the Australians had been active, villages were razed to the ground and whole families wiped out."<sup>20</sup> Australian veterans from the Timor campaign have long been grateful for the help they received on the island of Timor.<sup>21</sup>

After the war, the Dutch East Indies transitioned to independence while East Timor returned to Portuguese rule. Despite talk of East Timorese independence, the devastation incurred during the war meant the independence movement had largely been wiped out. Across the border, Indonesia was born under the so-called "guided democracy" of President Sukarno (1947–66).<sup>22</sup> Sukarno's version of democracy closely resembled a dictatorship. He immediately caught the ire of Western democracies while attempting to forge a postwar Indonesia–Cambodia–China–North Korea–North Vietnam communist axis.<sup>23</sup> Under Sukarno, Indonesian relations with Western nations rapidly deteriorated.

In Indonesia, Sukarno's rule was divisively unpopular. The leader's support base was divided into two ideologically opposed camps: the military and the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). There was inherent volatility between the two, and the military grew increasingly suspicious of Sukarno's ruling style.<sup>24</sup> Particular sources of friction were the president's alliance with China and the military confrontation with Malaysia, Konfrontasi (1963–66), during which British and Australian soldiers clashed with Indonesian troops.<sup>25</sup> Despite internal and external grievances, Sukarno continued his broad policies favoring the PKI. However, as the Indonesian economy suffered, discontent grew, and Sukarno's generals moved against him. After a successful coup d'état, the

military assumed control of the country under the leadership of General Suharto, who became president of Indonesia on 27 March 1968.<sup>26</sup>

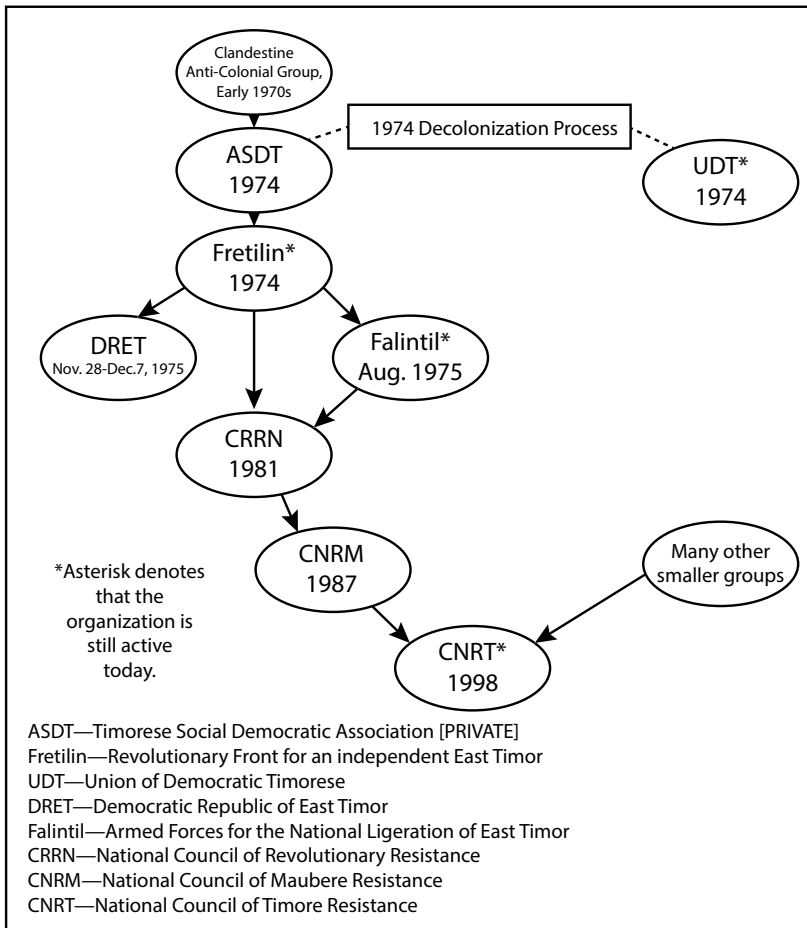
The Western reaction to the change of leadership was celebration, particularly in Australia and the United States. Western leaders considered it remarkable that, in the midst of the Cold War, General Suharto and the Indonesian National Army (TNI)<sup>27</sup> had usurped the powerful PKI.<sup>28</sup> The result, while politically positive, was morally reprehensible. In achieving its objectives, the TNI's tactics were brutal.<sup>29</sup> America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) concluded that the TNI's subsequent pogrom was one of the worst mass murders of the twentieth century—approximately 800,000 communists were slaughtered.<sup>30</sup> Despite the gross abuse of human rights, Washington and Canberra fully supported Suharto's actions.<sup>31</sup>

In a few short years, Suharto had transformed the Southeast Asian security environment. After Sukarno's overthrow, Indonesia developed into a Western-friendly and stable Southeast Asian country.<sup>32</sup> From Canberra and Washington's points of view, the future with Indonesia looked positive. Relations grew steadily closer between 1966 and 1974. The isolated Portuguese outpost of East Timor, in the middle of the archipelago and only 300 miles north of Australia, existed peacefully within its surroundings. Suharto was not focused on the tiny nation, and neither were politicians in Canberra or Washington.<sup>33</sup> In sum, the United States and Australia turned blind eyes to the massacre of Indonesians in 1965–66, signaling a recurring theme within the archipelago: gross abuse of human rights were tolerated provided such action was associated with the broader goal of containing Cold War communism.<sup>34</sup>

Almost a decade later, the Portuguese Carnation Revolution of 1974 left a power vacuum in peaceful East Timor. The Lisbon coup d'état was relatively uneventful. Military leaders dedicated to democracy and decolonization quickly overthrew the fascist Portuguese government.<sup>35</sup> As Portugal commenced the chaotic transition from dictatorship to democracy, it began immediately withdrawing from Portuguese colonies. This left East Timor isolated and bereft of governance.<sup>36</sup> Still, the departure of Portuguese authority created an air of excited anticipation in East Timor; the centuries-long struggle for independence suddenly appeared a possibility.

The power vacuum in East Timor triggered the creation of three distinct and divided political movements. The Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) desired immediate independence and came to symbolize the fight for freedom in East Timor. Two other parties also emerged: the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT), desirous of a slower process of achieving independence and the maintenance of ties with Portugal; and, Apodeti (Timorese Popular Democratic Association), which favored immediate

integration with Indonesia.<sup>37</sup> Figure 1 displays the evolution of the East Timor resistance movements. Despite the various and changing abbreviations, the common influence throughout was the Fretilin organization. Fretilin was the symbol of East Timor resistance, always dominating the internal machinations of the primary resistance movement. Falintil is important as well, its members were the armed guerrilla movement supporting Fretilin.



**Figure 1. The origins of the National Council of Timorese Resistance.** (Source: Richard Tanter, Mark Selden, and Stephen R. Shalom, *Bitter Flowers, Sweet Flowers: East Timor, Indonesia, and the World Community* [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001], 21.)

Through numerous twists of fate Fretilin's independence struggle would cause yet another bloodbath in the archipelago. Fretilin, the dominant political party in East Timor, was in essence a socialist movement. However, Indonesia and subsequently the international community labeled them communists.<sup>38</sup> There is some evidence suggesting Fretilin subscribed to some Marxist ideology. It did not, however, deserve the *communist* label within the volatile Cold War context. Following centuries of imperialism, Fretilin's goals were simply to unite East Timor and improve the population's standard of living, primarily by focusing on agricultural production. Its socialist leanings differed little from those in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, countries that have many government programs derived from socialist principles. Fretilin had no intention of participating in the Cold War spread of communism. But the communist label stuck, and for the international community, this partly explained the brutal policies of East Timor's Indonesian neighbors.

Over the 24 years from 1975 to 1999, the East Timorese would be subjected to a gross breach of human rights. According to Portuguese estimates, East Timor's population was more than 650,000 in 1974.<sup>39</sup> Within six months of the Indonesian invasion, an estimated 60,000 people were killed—roughly 10 percent of the population.<sup>40</sup> In 1979, an Indonesian church organization reported the population had declined from almost 690,000 in 1974, to under 330,000 four years later.<sup>41</sup> While many of the missing East Timorese had fled across the border to West Timor, approximately 200,000 are estimated to have died at the hands of their Indonesian invaders or died of starvation or disease in Indonesian-run refugee camps.<sup>42</sup> Unlike the Indonesian communist purge of 1965–66, there would be immediate UN condemnation of Indonesian actions in East Timor. Over the subsequent decades, UN resolutions urging an Indonesian withdrawal would pass *ad nauseam*. However, without UN troops to enforce the resolutions, Indonesia simply ignored them and continued to abuse the East Timorese. In 1999 an Australian-led UN mission was finally sent to East Timor to restore order. This paper continues with an investigation into why Australian support for military intervention in East Timor took 25 years to develop.

### Notes

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25. Paul M. Monk, “Secret Intelligence and Escape Clauses: Australia and the Indonesian Annexation of East Timor, 1963–76,” *Critical Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2001), 182.
26. Scott, “United States and the Overthrow of Sukarno.”
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30. Kiernan, “Cover-up and Denial of Genocide,” 186.
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33. *Ibid.*, 187.
34. Richard Tanter, Mark Selden, and Stephen R. Shalom, *Bitter Flowers, Sweet Flowers: East Timor, Indonesia, and the World Community* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 173.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

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36. Ibid., 82.
37. Pinto and Jardine, *Inside the East Timor Resistance*, 13.
38. David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 208.
39. Dunn, *East Timor*, 3.
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## Chapter 3

### **The 1975 Indonesian Invasion**

The 1975 Indonesian invasion of East Timor was a traumatic event for the Timorese population. Tragically, it was the result of state leadership in Indonesia, Portugal, the United Nations, East Timor, Australia, and the United States acting in accordance with their individual interpretations of the long-term interests of the region. In short, all parties wanted a stable and peaceful eastern side of the Timor Island. In the political vacuum left behind by Portugal, the conflicting views on how to achieve this stability led rapidly to a civil war, followed by a state-on-state conflict between the newly independent East Timorese and their powerful Indonesian neighbors. What no one could predict, possibly even Indonesian President Suharto, was the viciousness of the Indonesian military tactics used against the East Timorese. This failure meant that pre-1975 decisions regarding the future of East Timor were based predominantly on fears of communism in the region, not on any threat posed by the East Timorese themselves.

### **Indonesian Policy**

Indonesians believed East Timor was rightfully theirs. The tiny Portuguese colonial outpost of East Timor sat in the middle of the Indonesian Archipelago, dwarfed by over 6,000 inhabited Indonesian islands. The Portuguese empire had poorly administered East Timor and, despite desires for independence, the local population had been kept largely silent by its dictatorial European authority. The 1974 Portuguese revolution then created a vacuum of governance in East Timor. Locals perceived the development as opening the door for East Timor independence; however, the Indonesian president perceived otherwise—that this was an opportunity for unification.

Suharto argued that an independent East Timor would destabilize the region. He believed the fractured and divided East Timorese were unlikely to produce an effective governing body. Economically, they produced little and would need the support of the international community to survive. Defense was also an issue. East Timor's military was organized and commanded by the Portuguese. Suharto feared an independent East Timor would fall prey to the highest international bidder, the inherent instability possibly affording a communist country a strategic foothold in Southeast Asia. In 1974 Suharto expressed this concern to the Australian prime minister, explaining he did not

want East Timor to become a “thorn in the eye of Australia and a thorn in Indonesia’s back.”<sup>1</sup>

The East Timorese were unable to express their peaceful intentions coherently to the international audience. Despite organizing an embryonic governance structure, local-level political cleavages surfaced as the ideologies of the three main East Timorese movements positioned for power. These local cleavages developed into a short civil war, primarily fought between the two larger movements: Fretilin and UDT. The war not only stalled the internal momentum for unification, it also exacerbated the security concerns of the Southeast Asian region.

The Fretilin movement emerged victorious from the civil war, earning itself a communist brand in the process. During the war, highly organized Fretilin soldiers dominated skirmishes against the UDT forces, which quickly fled across the border to West Timor. In Indonesia, the beaten UDT forces labeled Fretilin a communist threat. The charge stuck. Indonesian state-run Radio Kupang broadcast the East Timor communist story, while the Indonesian free press circulated unfounded articles of a communist Chinese infiltration into the archipelago.<sup>2</sup> Photographs from inside East Timor of nonuniformed fighters brandishing AK-47s contrasted with images of Indonesian forces supplied with their US-made hardware. This perception supported the rumor that East Timor was not only descending into a chaotic civil war, but the Fretilin fighters had also acquired outside backing. The labeling of Fretilin as a *communist insurgency* became an influential factor in the views of the regional community, buttressing the concerns of the international audience monitoring the situation, particularly Australia and the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Suharto believed Fretilin threatened regional security. Fretilin was popular among the locals, but the Indonesian president believed this support was either coerced or ill conceived. In the absence of Portuguese governance, Suharto became adamant that Indonesia should fill the political vacuum. This sentiment was expressed in 1975 when the Indonesian government conveyed to Australia that the “only acceptable solution now to the future of Portuguese Timor is integration with Indonesia.”<sup>4</sup> Suharto’s main argument was that Indonesia could *save* an abandoned nation from the scourge of communism. In the aftermath of the Indonesian military invasion, Indonesian foreign minister Adam Malik highlighted this attitude, claiming, “50,000 people or perhaps 80,000 might have been killed during the war in Timor, but we saved 600,000 of them.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite the violent invasion, the unification plan for Timor did not initially call for overt military force. In 1974 Suharto desired a peaceful resolution. Failing that, he favored a covert military option, but only if “absolutely neces-



sary.”<sup>6</sup> It appears that initially Suharto made a genuine effort to incorporate East Timor through more peaceful means. He publicly called on Portugal to restore order and attempted to influence local politics in favor of integration by controversially moving large numbers of Indonesian Timorese into the Portuguese half of Timor.<sup>7</sup> In August 1975, as East Timor descended into civil war, Suharto could have legitimately argued the Indonesian military was a stabilizing force for a disintegrating East Timor. At that time, however, he opted against using military force.

Suharto wanted to maintain stable relations with powerful countries outside his archipelago, while unifying Timor within it. In October 1975, as the situation deteriorated, Suharto authorized a controversial covert operation aimed at delegitimizing the popular Fretilin political movement in the eyes of the East Timorese. At its core, Suharto’s covert operation was aimed at facilitating a united Timor “on the basis of the freely expressed wishes of the people of Portuguese Timor.”<sup>8</sup> The CIA was aware of the covert operations and compiled reports of Indonesian special forces clashing with Fretilin during this timeframe.<sup>9</sup>

When Fretilin declared East Timor an independent nation on 28 November 1975, the covert plan lost its need for secrecy. The independence declaration angered Suharto and triggered a rapid change from covert military operations to a full-scale military invasion of East Timor. Suharto’s justification to the international community was unacceptable political instability on the East/West Timor border, combined with the wider threat of a communist insurrection in the region.<sup>10</sup> Following the military campaign, Suharto annexed East Timor in July 1976.

### **Portuguese Policy**

The Portuguese withdrawal from East Timor was dysfunctional. The coup in Lisbon caught the Portuguese political and military establishments in East Timor off guard.<sup>11</sup> There was subsequently a perception in Dili that the Portuguese pulled out quickly without looking back.<sup>12</sup> However, at the international level, the Portuguese were scrambling to create an institution to manage the decolonization process. This effort mattered little because the East Timorese had scant access to information beyond their borders. Perception was reality: the East Timorese were in a governance vacuum.

East Timorese political movements organized themselves into a limited form of governance. But they ultimately foundered. Unlike the retracting British Empire, leaving in its wake the English parliamentary system and

English common law, the political system in East Timor largely represented a colonial version of the Portuguese dictatorship. When the political power left, there was no governmental framework to emulate. Had there been a parliamentary system in place, it may have revealed little ideological difference between the main competing movements—Fretilin and Apodeti—beyond a disagreement regarding the timeframe for East Timorese independence. Absent a national forum for discussion and compromise, political fractures quickly turned to violence and then civil war. In the process, the fight for independence was hobbled.

There was no external organization capable of intervening and arbitrating a settlement. The Portuguese military detachment had depleted to only 70 combat troops. Prior to 1974, this detachment had trained many East Timorese as noncommissioned soldiers, but these local soldiers realized Portugal was collapsing and attached themselves to the Fretilin movement.<sup>13</sup> In far greater numbers, the Portuguese military may have provided stability. However, in the midst of the Carnation Revolution, the Portuguese Empire had more pressing concerns than the maintenance of security in a distant colony.

Back in Portugal, the 1974 revolution brought democracy and, with it, a crisis of governance. In the months of transition between dictatorship and democracy, East Timor was abandoned without a bipartisan authority to guide its quest for independence. Portugal had the expertise, but the socialist political leaders involved with Timor immediately resigned from public life. This left Portuguese public servants unfamiliar with East Timor to negotiate the de-colonization process.<sup>14</sup>

As the situation deteriorated, the Southeast Asian region blamed Portugal for the instability. A conversation between Australian prime minister Gough Whitlam (1972–75) and Malaysian prime minister Tun Abdul Razak (1970–76) on 15 October 1975 confirmed the poor regional sentiment. Both leaders agreed that “Portugal had acted irresponsibly.”<sup>15</sup> They discussed the possibility of an Indonesian intervention force to stabilize the region, while dismissing the request from Portugal for an intervention to be mounted by Malaysia and Australia. Neither prime minister was willing to oppose Indonesia and take on this role.<sup>16</sup> This sentiment was echoed in the wider ASEAN community; intervention was unlikely unless Suharto requested it.

Portugal made genuine attempts to arbitrate a peaceful decolonization process. In March 1975 there was a meeting in London between high-level Indonesian and Portuguese delegations. The Portuguese advised Indonesia there was little support in the colony for integration. Portugal rejected the notion that Indonesia should be directly involved with East Timor’s quest for independence, proposing that a council be created to enable transition in ac-

cordance with East Timorese wishes. This council would represent all interested parties, including the Indonesians, the Portuguese, and the rival factions in East Timor. The Decolonization Commission subsequently became reality and approved a three-year period for East Timorese self-determination.<sup>17</sup> The transition period would never eventuate.

Indonesian, East Timor, and Portuguese parties were invited to attend Decolonization Commission talks. Leaders of the dominant Fretilin movement refused to participate. They were incensed that their rival movement, Apodeti, was invited to participate. How could Apodeti, which proposed *recolonization* by Indonesia, be given a voice at a *decolonization* commission? Ironically, Fretilin's boycott eliminated an opportunity to highlight its concerns internationally. This reinforced Fretilin's mystique at a time it needed any opportunity to advertise its peaceful cause. In a parallel maneuver, Fretilin sought an independent decolonization process via bilateral negotiations with Portugal. Fretilin symbolically ensured the Portuguese flag remained flying in Dili and encouraged the return of a Portuguese delegation to discuss independence. The delegation never arrived.

By late 1975, Fretilin had been abandoned by Portugal and was being covertly attacked by Indonesia. The Fretilin forces regularly found themselves in border skirmishes with the Indonesian military. Inflaming the situation, Canberra had leaked intelligence to Fretilin alluding to an imminent Indonesian invasion. In an attempt to gain international attention and regain the initiative, Fretilin declared independence on 28 November 1975, founding the Democratic Republic of East Timor. Fretilin leaders later cited Indonesian border incursions as the "biggest single factor" behind their decision to declare independence.<sup>18</sup> Fretilin felt it had little choice. Its three-year decolonization transition period was accelerated to one day. Indonesia responded to the news by launching an invasion.

### United States Policy

*It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure.*

—Pres. Harold S. Truman  
Address to Congress  
12 March 1947

*To those new States whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny.*

—Pres. John F. Kennedy  
Inaugural Address  
20 January 1961

*America cannot—and will not—conceive all the plans, design all the programs, execute all the decisions, and undertake all the defense of the free nations.*

—Pres. Richard M. Nixon  
Address to Congress  
18 February 1970

The period surrounding the Portuguese revolution and the Indonesian invasion of East Timor was tumultuous for the United States. The Cold War occupied the minds of US citizens: “An American study of the 1960s . . . surveyed 3,000 children and adolescents . . . 95 percent expressed a serious concern about the danger of war and 44 percent lived in fear, waiting for war.” This fear fueled US strategic thinking. A war-weary American public had watched its military savaged in Southeast Asia for the best part of a decade. Americans wanted their troops to come home, and they wanted protection from a nuclear war. US strategists offered them this protection. Mutually assured destruction (MAD) was developed to decrease the chance of Cold War nuclear exchange. Yet the Cuban missile crisis highlighted a flaw: small communist-backed nations did not operate within MAD logic. There were many lessons from those 13 days of tension, one of which was the prudence of discouraging small nations from becoming infiltrated with communism.

By 1975, US post–World War II enthusiasms for supporting free and democratic nations had noticeably waned. The United States could not protect the free world without suffering itself. The 1950s rhetoric of US support for any state seeking freedom and independence had transformed by the 1970s. The ideology shifted to something more manageable: containing the spread of communism. After its defeat in Vietnam, US defense policy changed to a “stand-off policy, based on naval power and support for local allies rather than direct engagement.”

Indochina fell to communists as the crisis was developing in East Timor. The Timorese may have perceived they qualified for US support against their own form of iron tyranny, but this was not the reality. There were numerous reasons for the United States to support Suharto rather than East Timor. First,

Suharto had pleased Washington with his brutal approach to communism in Southeast Asia. Second, the East Timorese were suspected of being communists themselves. Third, the ongoing Israeli–Arab tensions in the Middle East increased the value of US relations with Indonesia, the home of the world’s largest Muslim population. Finally, the 6,000 inhabited Indonesian islands surrounding East Timor were fundamental to US objectives in the region.

The Indonesian archipelago was, and remains, home to the movement of huge volumes of commercial shipping. The narrow archipelago constitutes one of seven globally strategic maritime chokepoints. If Indonesia were to restrict America’s naval movement in these areas, it would reduce the latter’s ability to dominate “global military movement and world trade.” Further, the Ombai–Wetar Straits lie north of East Timor. These deep channels provide for undetected passage of US submarines between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. If the United States lost access to this passage, its submarines would be forced to surface before passing through the shallow Malacca Straits or to use the Lombok or Selat Sunda straits—adding eight days to the travel time.

Backing Suharto was a wise investment for the US government. By 1974 Suharto had been in power for seven years and had become a stabilizing influence in Southeast Asia. Not only had he suppressed communism, he also was now refusing to allow right-wing Islamist movements to gain political momentum in Indonesia. US allies Australia and New Zealand welcomed Suharto’s leadership in the region and sought stronger ties with their heavily populated trading partner to the north. ASEAN, excluding Singapore, voted against the UN resolutions condemning Indonesia. In general, ASEAN supported the direction Suharto was taking in Indonesia: a more tolerant region with greater Western interaction. Indonesia was an important player in Southeast Asia; it was also an important player globally.

By early 1975, the United States became convinced that East Timor’s dominant political movement, Fretilin, was backed by communist Vietnam or communist China. US president Gerald Ford’s administration (1974–77) contemplated the emergence of a communist microstate in the Indonesian archipelago and drew a strategic comparison with the island of Cuba in its own Caribbean backyard. With the US military withdrawing from Vietnam, Suharto’s plan to integrate East Timor with his stable, anticommunist nation would help contain communism in the region. This was good news for the United States.

Following the East Timorese civil war in August 1975, the CIA briefed President Ford that an invasion was being considered by Indonesia. As the situation deteriorated, this option moved to the forefront of Suharto’s mind. Suharto may not have ascribed to international relations theory suggesting

the United States decides the fate of East Timor, but he knew US reaction to an invasion was crucial for a number of reasons. First, the United States was the regional hegemon, and its opposition would complicate the invasion; second, the United States had veto power in the United Nations, meaning if it supported Suharto, it could nullify any UN resolution against Indonesia; third, Australia historically meddled in Indonesian politics but was unlikely to oppose US policy; and finally, 90 percent of Indonesia's military hardware was supplied by the United States. The last factor was critical because Indonesia's use of that hardware in East Timor soon violated the terms under which it was provided.

Senior US leadership understood the importance and the convenience of Indonesia's anticommunist campaign and did not oppose the invasion. Further, when they became aware that US arms had been used in East Timor, they ignored it. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger considered the violation of Indonesian supply agreements of little or no concern. Following the invasion, he commented to Assistant Secretary of State Philip Habib that, "No one has complained that it was aggression." Kissinger's legal advisor was present at the time, and queried, "What do we say to Congress if we're asked?" Kissinger replied, "We cut it off while we are studying it. We intend to start again in January." For the Indonesian military, there was no interruption to US arms supply before, during, or after the invasion.

The sentiment between Indonesia and the United States in the lead-up to the East Timor invasion was not that of close allies, rather it was one of accommodation. On 6 December 1975, the night before the invasion, Suharto hosted Ford at a dinner in Indonesia. Ford proposed a toast to Suharto, stating that their "relationship involves a common concern for the right of every nation to pursue its destiny on its own independent and sovereign course." Behind closed doors this sentiment was modified. When transcripts were declassified in 2001, they revealed Suharto advised Ford privately that Fretilin was infected with communism. Ford subsequently assured Suharto the United States would not object if Indonesia took "drastic action" in East Timor. Less than 24 hours after this visit, Indonesia invaded. When Ford returned to the United States, his administration made no public statements regarding the situation in East Timor.

### **Australian Policy**

*The strategic concern that has been intermittently expressed in Australia for over 100 years arises from this very weakness of the*

*[Pacific] islands . . . the fear has been that a hostile external power may establish bases in the islands either to threaten Australia or to threaten its sea lines of communication.*

—Gary Smith  
*Australia in the World*, 1996

*Indonesia is of the greatest strategic significance to Australia.*

—Australian Defence Committee  
*Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy*, 1971

*Portuguese Timor was too small to be independent.*

—Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, 1974

In the period following the Malayan Emergency and Vietnam War, the decision by the United Kingdom and United States to withdraw from the Southeast Asia left Australian strategists to ponder whether Australia had become, by default, a more influential player in the region. The government believed it had. Despite being a small postcolonial power, Australia indicated its desire to influence international relations in Southeast Asia. By the mid-1970s, the beginnings of a new, more independent military strategy had taken form, supported by an increasingly independent foreign policy.

In 1975 Australia's approach to the East Timor dilemma represented its independent foreign policy. Unfortunately, it was ad hoc, contradictory, and beset with domestic political disagreements. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) believed Australia should support an independent East Timor, while the prime minister disregarded this advice and conveyed Australia's tacit support for an Indonesian annexation. Australia subsequently supported UN resolutions condemning the Indonesian invasion but failed to offer troops to enforce those resolutions. Decades later, Australia would lead a high-profile UN military intervention force to secure East Timor's independence. The story behind the confusion is complicated. International relations, natural disasters, and the greatest domestic political crisis in Australia's history all played a role in shaping Australia's muddled 1975 response to the East Timor crisis.

In the wake of Vietnam, the Australian public had little tolerance for military deployments in Southeast Asia. The focus, both domestically and internationally, was damage control. In April 1975 Australian forces evacuated the Australian embassy in Saigon. The war against the communists had divided the Australian nation, and public sentiment echoed that of the United States.

Another military intervention, this time in East Timor would have been political suicide for an Australian government. Further eroding East Timor's chance of support was an unexpected phenomenon—the weather. In early 1975 Australia was recovering from Cyclone Tracy, which struck the northern Australian city of Darwin, devastating its population and infrastructure. Tracy was the most powerful recorded storm system on earth until Atlantic Tropical Storm Marco in 2008. Darwin, located approximately 300 nautical miles south of Dili, was East Timor's only non-Indonesian connection to the outside world. In 1975 Australia focused on the Darwin recovery operations and halted the twice-weekly air service to East Timor's Baucau Airport. Thus, East Timor had to rely solely on its Indonesian neighbors for outside communications.

Further removing the focus from East Timor was an Australian domestic political crisis. The Whitlam Labor Government was foundering. Aside from damaging internal scandals, its greatest problem emerged as an inability to maintain monetary supply through a Liberal-controlled Senate. The crisis deepened, and on 11 November 1975, a few weeks prior to the Indonesian invasion, the governor-general dismissed the prime minister. This was the first and only such occurrence in Australian history. In the subsequent election, the Liberal Party's Malcolm Fraser won in a landslide. By the time he took power, Indonesian forces were firmly established in East Timor. Prime Minister Fraser (1975–83) inherited the responsibility for relations with the neighbors to the north. As reflected in the 1976 white paper, the Australian government believed, "Friendly relations between Australia and its major neighbor Indonesia have prevailed for thirty years and have successfully weathered occasional sharp differences."

Fraser knew that good relations with Indonesia were good for Australia. Under Pres. Sukarno many of the sharp differences between the two countries had destabilized the region, the low point being Konfrontasi (1963–66), where Australian soldiers clashed directly with Indonesian troops. After Sukarno's overthrow, Indonesia had developed into a friendlier and more stable neighbor. Suharto's brutal approach to communism and dim view of Islamic fundamentalism also particularly pleased Canberra.

Australia and the United States viewed Indonesia's integration of East Timor as nothing more than a speed bump on the road to mutually beneficial international relations. Whitlam, facing a mountain of pressure at home, knew any friction with Indonesia could damage his chances of reelection, and he resisted DFAT's urges for him to support East Timor's independence. Whitlam knew that Suharto's aggression bothered factions on both sides of politics, but an international standoff with Australia's northern neighbor would likely be politically more damaging. On 15 October 1975, Whitlam



met with Suharto and, according to Australia's ambassador to Indonesia, Richard Woolcott, explained to Suharto that if it came down to a choice between Portuguese East Timor and Indonesia, Australia would side with the latter. Following the meeting, Woolcott sent a cablegram to Canberra that included the following:

There is no doubt in my mind that the Indonesian Government's fundamental assessment of our position is predicated on the talks between Mr. Whitlam and President Suharto in Townsville. Particularly important to the Indonesians was the Prime Minister's view expressed in the Record as follows:—'He wished to reaffirm, however, that we strongly desired closer and more cordial relations with Indonesia and would ensure that our actions in regard to Portuguese Timor would always be guided by the principle that good relations with Indonesia were of paramount importance to Australia.'<sup>39</sup>

While this exchange inferred unconditional support for Indonesia, it must be also placed in context. At this point in the crisis, Indonesia had refrained from using military force and Suharto wanted to avoid overt force if possible. It is reasonable to assume that Whitlam was aware of this inclination when he gave these assurances to Suharto. Further, Whitlam had outlined his threefold position on numerous occasions: Australia supported Indonesia; the East Timorese had a right to self-determination; and, the use of overt force would damage the relationship between Australia and Indonesia. Whitlam's message was consistent; however, the intentional emphasis of the first aspect of the message resonated more deeply than the rest. As the crisis developed, Australian tacit support for Indonesia was all that mattered to Suharto.

### United Nations Policy

*There is no recognized authority higher than the state in the current international system.*

—Dr. Everett Dolman

*The United States wished things [East Timor] to turn out as they did, and worked to bring this about. The Department of State desired that the United Nations prove utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook. This task was given to me, and I carried it forward with no inconsiderable success.*

—Daniel Patrick Moynihan  
US Ambassador to the United Nation, 1975–76

The United Nations acted quickly following the Indonesian invasion of East Timor. On 12 December 1975 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for withdrawal of all Indonesian troops and for all states to recognize the independence of East Timor. Ten days later it passed another resolution calling for Indonesia to withdraw without delay. Because the issue was not considered important enough to warrant peacekeeping measures, the Security Council committed no troops to enforce the resolutions.

Throughout the crisis, Indonesia repeated its support for the decolonization process in East Timor. On 4 December 1975, prior to the UN resolutions, Indonesia's permanent resident to the United Nations reiterated the position that Indonesia believed East Timor had a right to self-determination. He added, however, that Indonesia would not allow East Timor to disintegrate from the inside. It is reasonable to assume Fretilin's declaration of independence met the Indonesian criterion for disintegration.

Through its conspicuous absence, the United States supported Indonesia's invasion. The United States abstained from the UN vote, reinforcing the notion that relations with Indonesia were of great strategic importance. The United States had publicly supported Suharto's vision for the region and followed this privately with specific support for the invasion. As Suharto would have expected, US policy within the UN framework provided no resistance to the Indonesian course of action.

Australia's muddled contribution to UN resolutions was in contrast to US consistency. On 24 September 1975, prior to the invasion, Whitlam publicly stated, "We have no intention of raising the question of Portuguese Timor in the United Nations." During numerous bilateral communications, Australia offered Indonesia tacit approval regarding East Timor's integration. Following the invasion, the Indonesians were understandably surprised that Australia had voted in favor of the UN resolutions condemning them. It is somewhat ironic that, in trying to maintain good Indonesian relations prior to the invasion, Australia managed to damage relations in the aftermath. Although Whitlam often reiterated the notion that the East Timorese should be allowed to determine their own future, the clear political message was that Whitlam supported the integration of East Timor with Indonesia and did not intend raising the issue with the United Nations. It is not surprising Indonesia felt Australia was playing all sides independently, crafting one message for Indonesia and another for the international community.

## Analysis

There were five major players affecting the outcome in 1975: Indonesia, Portugal, the United States, Australia, and the United Nations. According to international relations theory outlined in the previous chapter, as the regional superpower the United States ultimately determined the outcome. Portugal, Australia, and the United Nations could influence the United States; however, if the United States continued to support Indonesia, the outcome would be in Suharto's favor.

For Indonesia, the annexation of East Timor was a strategic response to instability in the archipelago. The Portuguese had vacated a colony on the Indonesian border, there were security implications, and Suharto intended to neutralize them. Initially, Suharto planned to restore security via a peaceful unification process. But it became a slippery slope from the use of covert military operations to a full-scale military offensive to achieve his goals. Suharto's strategic desire for unification resided in the wider interest of Southeast Asia. The acquiescence from ASEAN countries, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States reinforced Suharto's appreciation that annexing East Timor was a tolerable course of action with which to confront regional security concerns.

Despite being geographically separated, the United States was the dominant power in Southeast Asia. The legacy of the World War II Pacific theater meant the United States had a presence in numerous Southeast Asian countries and it dominated regional decision making. However, there was more to global politics than Southeast Asia. In 1975 the global strategic context was dictated by two great powers: the Soviet Union and the United States. Accordingly, the driving factors behind US foreign policy were nuclear war deterrence and the global containment of communism. The US decision to support Suharto must therefore be placed in the strategic context of the Cold War. From the US perspective, America was primarily concerned with the contribution Suharto was making toward halting the spread of communism.

The Cold War ideological battle heavily influenced US policy regarding East Timor. In 1975 the United States had just lost the communist fight in Indochina and, under significant domestic political pressure, was reducing its presence in the Asian region. With this withdrawal came a fear of communism spreading down the Malay Peninsula. The British were also withdrawing their forces from Southeast Asia. With a massive reduction of UK and US troops in the region, opposing Suharto—a proven anticommunist—made no sense for US policy makers.

Fretilin was declared a communist party. This assertion by Suharto was factually incorrect; however, it served to reinforce US support for Indonesia.

While Fretilin was undoubtedly socialist, the United States placed emphasis on the Indonesian-supplied intelligence that concluded the political void caused by Portugal was being filled by a communist insurgency. Additional factors contributed to US communist suspicions. First, Fretilin refused to participate in the Portuguese-led Decolonization Commission and declared independence without consultation, creating a perception of Fretilin autocracy. Second, prior to calling themselves Fretilin, the organization was named the Timorese Social Democratic Association, a communist-sounding title. Third, in Australia and Indonesia, Fretilin cadres were widely rumored to be Marxist sympathizers. Founded or unfounded, in the Cold War strategic environment these rumors were damaging. Fretilin's silence added weight to Suharto's accusations that Fretilin was infected with communism.

The potential for a communist microstate in the Indonesian archipelago was not only a thorn in the side of the Indonesians and Australians, it was also a strategic problem for the United States. In 1975 the United States was fighting communism on a global scale, perceiving it to be an existential threat. Suharto had proven himself as an enemy of communism. He complemented US global policy, whereas Fretilin did not. Given the Cold War context, the East Timor political vacuum, and the intelligence available at the time, it was appropriate for the United States to support the Indonesian plan to restore stability to East Timor. Despite the subsequent atrocities committed in East Timor at the hands of the Indonesians, it must be remembered that US support was garnered before the Indonesian invasion. While casualties are expected in a military invasion, the possibility of atrocities was not yet in the US decision-making calculus.

Australia was also caught in the context of the Cold War. A staunch supporter of the US quest to contain communism, the Australians had welcomed Suharto as the replacement to the much-maligned Sukarno. Only eight years prior, Australian and Indonesian troops had clashed on the Malay border as Sukarno attempted to expand Indonesia. In the wake of this difficult period, Australia sought improved strategic relationships, not further military clashes. Suharto was not perfect; however, unlike Sukarno, he clearly favored the West. In 1972 the Australian government articulated, "Australia's relations with Indonesia are of profound and permanent importance to Australia's security and national interest."

Whitlam agreed with Suharto that East Timor was not viable as an independent state. History proved them incorrect, but does this alone make their decision making flawed? With the benefit of hindsight, we know that East Timor required 15 years of UN support before standing on its own in 2014. It remains a fragile state requiring foreign assistance to survive. In 1975 the viability

of East Timor was rightly questionable. The Portuguese governing body had vacated, leaving a political vacuum and triggering a civil war. The victor, a suspected communist sympathizer, declared independence and boycotted the ensuing decolonization negotiations. Reports of clashes within the borders then continued throughout 1975, including reports of civilians fleeing from the communist fighters. Much of this intelligence was subsequently proven inaccurate, yet it was the information used to build a picture. Considering the context of the era and the evidence available at the time, the assessment that East Timor was unlikely to be a viable independent state was, however distasteful today, reasonable.

Despite evidence of a communist infiltration, Australia did not give unconditional support to Indonesia's annexation plan. Whitlam expressed to Suharto that East Timor should decide its own future. He added that using overt military force in East Timor would damage the relationship between Australia and Indonesia. In essence, Whitlam gambled Suharto's covert military operations would work; they did not. Australia found itself supporting Indonesia and supporting East Timor's right to self-determination.

Was this a naive approach to international relations? Perhaps. The real question is whether or not a window of opportunity was lost as a result of this naivety.

Counterfactuals may always be proven true because they are based on a false premise, a thing did not happen; but they can occasionally divulge insight. Revisiting the history of 1975 and reversing Australia's position on East Timor suggests there was no window of opportunity for the Australians to alter the East Timor situation. According to the international relations theory that animates this discussion, the United States decided whether or not the Indonesians invaded. If we accept this, then Australia had to argue a case that reversed the US decision.

Australia had to find a way to move the United States away from supporting Indonesia—transition it into indecision—before attempting to garner its support for East Timor. There were significant diplomatic walls to knock down before the United States would perform this backflip. Using the framework from chapter 2 as a guide reveals the task required of the Australians. The most effective way for Australia to achieve US support would have been to (1) realign established great-power policy with small-power self-interest, (2) be willing to offer viable solutions to pursue that interest, and (3) be capable of executing combat missions in support of proposed solutions.

First, Australia would have had to convince the United States it had self-interest in an independent East Timor. Essentially, Australia would be arguing that US security interests would be better served by supporting Fretilin

than Suharto, a decidedly difficult task at the time. How could this be done? The fear of communism was a major driver of US support; disputing Suharto's claims would be essential. Suharto assured Ford that Fretilin were communists. Could Australia subsequently assure Ford they were not? By December 1975 Australia had a new prime minister, Malcolm Fraser. Could his first order of business be denouncing Indonesia? Would he be willing to risk this course of action based on some conflicting evidence? In the unlikely event Fraser convinced the Americans that Suharto was misleading them, he would then have to align Fretilin's fight against Indonesia as being in accordance with the United States's broader global policy of containing communism. If Fretilin were just friendly socialists seeking independence, the entire situation was not a communist struggle—therefore unimportant.

To reinforce the enormity of the task, if we assume Fraser managed to somehow realign US self-interest with Fretilin's quest for independence, there remained even greater obstacles. The second aspect of garnering great-power support is a willingness to offer viable solutions to pursue its newfound interest. What viable solutions, other than direct intervention, could be offered? The Indonesians had already displayed contempt for UN resolutions. Could US and/or Australian troops be mobilized to enforce them? In the immediate wake of Vietnam, an attempt by either democracy to rush an Indonesian strategic policy reversal through their political systems while at the same time attempting to justify more troops in Southeast Asia would have been politically implausible.

The final criterion for successfully acquiring great-power support is demonstrating the potential to execute combat missions in support of proposed solutions. Considering their recent history fighting insurgent and conventional forces in Vietnam, it is reasonable to assume Australia was capable of executing a combat mission in East Timor. How the mission would actually proceed, what the reaction of Suharto would be, and what type of support would be required from the United States would be taking speculation beyond the point of reasonableness.

There was no window of opportunity for Australia in 1975. This short counterfactual analysis reveals the futility of Australia considering intervention in East Timor. The US decision had been made; the Indonesian military tide was released with little notice, nor expectation of impending atrocities. In 1975 Australia had no politically viable alternatives other than to reiterate more forcefully its diplomatic support for East Timor's right to self-determination. Would an impassioned diplomatic plea have changed anything? If the response to the UN resolutions is an indicator, the answer is no.

Indonesia's desire for unification in 1975 indicates only coordinated international condemnation backed by a credible threat of the use of force would have reversed the invasion. The invasion could not have been deterred or prevented because it was unilaterally executed with little warning. Further, there was no momentum from any state to use force to solve a problem it did not understand. Considering the confusion on all sides, any international coordination following the invasion was also unrealistic. Despite claims to the contrary, there was simply no window of opportunity for Australia to act in 1975.

The next chapter investigates events following formal annexation of East Timor in July 1976 to the end of the Cold War. As reports of Indonesian atrocities began to emerge, the United States, Australia, and the United Nations had ample opportunity to question their initial lack of action. Given that Australia successfully supported East Timor in the post-Cold War environment, did Australia miss a window of opportunity during the Cold War? The following chapter investigates that question.

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## Chapter 4

### **The Cold War Years, 1976–89**

The 1975 Indonesian invasion of East Timor was the precursor to 25 years of human rights abuse of the East Timorese population. While numerous resolutions were passed condemning Indonesian actions, the United Nations failed to respond effectively to Indonesia's flagrant disregard of international law. Connected to this failure were the US and Australian governments' failures to act. As the stories of death and destruction approached near genocidal levels, these two nations had the power to stop the carnage. However, due to commitments outside Southeast Asia, the United States chose not to pressure Suharto to withdraw his forces. Without this pressure, Australia lacked the capacity to influence Indonesian decision making. Much has been made of US and Australian inaction, and the East Timorese are often referred to as a forgotten people. However, during the Cold War, they were not merely forgotten, they were insignificant.

#### **Events in East Timor**

The Indonesian invasion of East Timor was devastating. Within six months, an estimated 60,000 people were killed—representing roughly 10 percent of the population.<sup>1</sup> In 1979 an Indonesian church organization reported the population had declined from almost 690,000 in 1974 to under 330,000 in 1979.<sup>2</sup> The Indonesian government denied this was the case. Indonesian foreign minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja estimated that 120,000 deaths were more accurate.<sup>3</sup> It is reasonable to assume the actual number lies somewhere between these figures. One thing is certain, the real figure will never be known.

The scale of the catastrophe is difficult to comprehend. Deaths in hundreds of thousands belie the individual horror of the carnage. The application of death tolls to war zones invokes images of soldiers clashing with soldiers, perhaps with some civilian collateral damage. The East Timor reality was the slaughter of civilian men, women, and children in the tens of thousands. Within this death toll were known mass killings that occurred in 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, and 1980.<sup>4</sup> Numerous eyewitness accounts exist of these massacres. During the 1975 invasion, Bishop José Ribeiro of East Timor witnessed a mass killing in Dili, the scene retold by James Dunn:

One of the most bizarre and gruesome of these atrocities occurred within twenty-four hours of the invasion and involved the killing of about 150 people. This shocking spectacle began with the execution of more than twenty women who, from various accounts, were selected at random. Some had young children who wept in distress as the soldiers tore them from the arms of their terrified mothers. . . . They were led out to the edge of the jetty and shot one at a time with the crowd of shocked onlookers being forced at gunpoint to count aloud as each execution took place.<sup>5</sup>

The East Timorese remained resilient throughout their ordeal, if not further hardened by the experience. While their postinvasion environment was dominated by “insecurity, fear and oppression,” the brutal tactics used by the Indonesian soldiers managed to seal the fractured political lines within East Timor’s population, uniting them with Fretilin against the common enemy.<sup>6</sup> As the situation deteriorated in 1976 and the Indonesian atrocities intensified, many of the UDT forces changed sides and fought for Fretilin. The East Timorese fighters resisted the Indonesian military for three years, although the situation became increasingly dire. Years later, one Fretilin officer recounted his experience, “All three of my family died at Indonesian hands—my wife had her throat cut . . . my children were poisoned. Thirteen other members of my family also perished.”<sup>7</sup>

The thousands of East Timorese who fled to the hills for security under Fretilin slowly began to starve. The guerrillas, who depended upon the support of the population to survive, were ill equipped to provide basic services in return. As a result, in 1977 Fretilin encouraged many East Timorese to hand themselves over to the Indonesians. When the Timorese emerged from the hills, they were shot, tortured, or placed in resettlement camps where either an agonizing existence or a slow death awaited them.<sup>8</sup>

By 1979 Suharto succumbed to international pressure and permitted limited non-Indonesian relief operations into East Timor. The relief workers found 200,000 East Timorese surviving in resettlement camps, conditions commensurate with the most appalling of human atrocities, including those on the Thai–Cambodian border.<sup>9</sup> Despite the presence of limited international aid, the remainder of the Cold War period saw little improvement for the East Timorese. The oppression continued, and by 1983 as much as 90 percent of the East Timorese population was controlled by the Indonesian military.<sup>10</sup>

Suharto’s forces failed in their objective to destroy Fretilin. Despite controlling the populated areas, the Indonesian military acknowledged remnant Fretilin forces were difficult to eliminate due to their village support networks within the Indonesian-controlled areas. Xanana Gusmão, who would become president in 2002, emerged in 1980 as Fretilin’s Falintil guerilla commander. He led a disciplined East Timorese resistance for more than a decade, becoming

a symbol of hope for the embattled population attempting to survive Indonesian occupation.<sup>11</sup> As is often the case with occupied populations, the more the occupier tried to crush the human spirit, the stronger the resistance became.<sup>12</sup>

The international community slowly gained information about the East Timorese plight. The United Nations; José Ramos-Horta, who served as permanent representative of Fretilin to the United Nations throughout much of the Indonesian occupation of East Timor; and the Catholic Church were largely responsible for this.<sup>13</sup> Despite failing to enforce resolutions, the United Nations did ensure the issue of East Timor never fully disappeared. Aided by this, Ramos-Horta disseminated the East Timorese legal and moral argument throughout the world. His 1996 Nobel Peace Prize not only recognized this work but also further increased awareness of the East Timorese predicament.<sup>14</sup> The Catholic Church complemented Ramos-Horta's efforts. Pope John Paul II visited East Timor in 1988, leading to unprecedented international coverage and broad condemnation of Indonesia's activities. In 1989 East Timor's Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo wrote to the UN secretary-general requesting a referendum on East Timor's future. The same bishop exposed the details of the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre, a turning point for East Timorese international support. The Church's efforts resulted in the East Timorese converting to Christianity in large numbers. By the time international help arrived in the late 1990s, more than 80 percent of the population classified themselves as Christians.<sup>15</sup> In the 1980s there was an absence of concrete international support; however, the United Nations, Ramos-Horta, and the Catholic Church gave the East Timorese some semblance of hope.

## Indonesian Policy

Suharto believed East Timor's armed resistance would capitulate under overwhelming Indonesian military force. When this did not transpire, a risk emerged. If the Timorese population achieved independence, Indonesia would find it difficult to control the narrative regarding the military's abuse of human rights. Initially, Suharto explained the violence as being the result of a Timorese civil war, successfully deflecting criticism of Indonesian activities. He then transformed the situation from an *invasion* of a sovereign territory into an *internal* security issue by annexing East Timor. The Indonesians masterfully carried out this plan aided by a media blackout, brutal control of the population, fabricated propaganda, and deception of the UN Security Council.

A free press is a vital component of a vibrant democracy. For support to be generated within the international community, particularly in Australia and the United States, the press needed access to East Timor. Prior to the 1975 invasion, the East Timorese welcomed foreign media. As reports of civil war and Indonesian military activity emerged, media interest increased. Reports then rapidly circulated regarding five journalists—dubbed the Balibo Five—who had been slaughtered by the Indonesian military. Rumors regarding the brutality of their fate meant that few journalists were willing to risk covering a story about which hardly anyone seemed to care. When Indonesia subsequently annexed East Timor, few foreigners were allowed to enter Indonesian military-controlled areas. Any journalists who gained access to Indonesian soil were prohibited from entering Fretilin-controlled areas. Indonesia effectively sealed off the East Timorese resistance from the outside world.<sup>16</sup>

The military oppression of the population was equal to the worst of human wartime behavior. The Indonesian's argued indigenous anti-Fretilin forces were causing the violence while driving Fretilin out of Dili. These anti-Fretilin forces had requested Indonesia's assistance. In reality, the Indonesian military was deployed to wipe out the Timorese population. The Indonesian troops viewed the Timorese as a backward and inferior race. Military commanders motivated their young soldiers by describing the war as Muslim jihad against a Catholic population or alternatively as the fight against communist infiltration.<sup>17</sup> The soldiers were ordered to destroy *any* opposition. Contributing to the toxic environment, the Indonesians and East Timorese spoke different languages—the East Timorese a local Tetum dialect, the Indonesians understanding only Bahasa. Desperate pleas for mercy from the Timorese fell on deaf ears.

The Indonesian military took control of the towns and cities, while the surviving Timorese population fled to the jungle. Indonesia, victorious, declared East Timor its twenty-seventh province on 17 July 1976, further claiming to have saved the Timorese from internal aggressors. However, by 1977, reports regarding atrocities that were at odds with the Indonesian story began to trickle out from the Catholic Church in Timor. As a result, an embarrassed Suharto prompted his military commanders to launch another major offensive to destroy the Fretilin resistance. This included a surge of 15,000 troops. The troops proceeded to destroy the populations of any village suspected of supporting Fretilin. Frustrated by the surviving Fretilin forces, the Indonesian military commenced a “fence of legs” operation whereby East Timorese men, women, and children were forced to march ahead of the Indonesian military as a shield against Fretilin fighters.<sup>18</sup> These tactics continued well into

the 1980s. By the mid-1980s, an exasperated Suharto declared East Timor to be in a state of emergency, ordering the military to crush the resistance.<sup>19</sup>

Indonesian propaganda contributed to confusion in the late 1970s and 1980s. In early 1976 the UN Security Council was briefed by Indonesia that an East Timorese Council would proceed with self-determination through a democratic election. On the ground in Timor, the reality was far from democratic. Local leaders were rounded up and forced to polling booths, their votes cast under the watchful eyes of Indonesian security forces. The result was handed to Suharto, and the process of *self-determination* was declared complete. Throughout the Cold War period, stage-managed receptions for Indonesian officials in Dili were carefully orchestrated. The facade included Indonesian soldiers dressed as East Timorese locals waving pro-Indonesian flags.<sup>20</sup> According to Indonesia, integration remained the wish of the East Timorese population. The unusual mass movement of the local population from their homes was, according to Indonesian officials, simply elements of the population fleeing from Fretilin fighters for their own protection.<sup>21</sup>

### Portuguese Policy

Following the invasion, Portugal broke diplomatic ties with Indonesia and requested UN sanctions with the view of returning Timor to its preinvasion status.<sup>22</sup> However, political upheaval in Lisbon crippled the Portuguese. Nevertheless, East Timor was Portugal's colony and the East Timorese its people. In multilateral negotiations, Portugal requested help from Australia and Malaysia. This plea went unanswered.<sup>23</sup> Further complicating matters, it was revealed that Portuguese forces had positioned themselves off the coast of East Timor and watched the 1975 invasion as "passive witnesses."<sup>24</sup> Prior to the invasion, the Indonesians had been concerned the modern Portuguese warships could dominate the Indonesian fleet. However, while the Indonesian navy and air force bombarded Dili, the Portuguese navy was instructed to abandon the area and sail for Darwin, Australia. They waited in harbor for months, in hopes that international condemnation would convince Suharto to withdraw his forces.<sup>25</sup> In the end, despite Portuguese frustration at the inaction within the international community, they failed to display the resolve they requested of others.

In the late 1970s, the Portuguese political situation stabilized, and the country became embarrassed by its abandonment of a former colony. Public sentiment in the democratic nation demanded something be done to support the embattled Timorese. Although Lisbon again found the process frustrating,

Portuguese persistence contributed to raising the profile of the East Timor plight within the European community. It sent envoys throughout Europe to promote an appreciation of the ongoing human rights violations and to reinforce support for a 1982 UN resolution.<sup>26</sup> This resolution declared “full and solemn commitment to uphold the right of the people of East Timor to self-determination and independence.”<sup>27</sup>

Portugal also assisted the East Timorese indirectly. Perhaps counterintuitively, Portuguese colonialism had united the Timorese against their *foreign* invaders. Although the international community viewed East Timor as part of an Indonesian island, the Portuguese legacy had given the indigenous population two distinct identities: nationality and religion. The East Timorese identified with their Portuguese heritage—Fretilin had waved the Portuguese flag in front of the governor’s mansion in anticipation of the Portuguese return, while the Indonesian flag was nothing but a symbol of oppression. Portugal had also established the Catholic Church in East Timor. Following the 1975 invasion, priests joined the Fretilin fighters in the jungle. They converted much of the population to Catholicism, uniting them in prayer and strengthening their resistance.<sup>28</sup> Despite all these unifying factors and the support being received from Lisbon, nothing was altering Suharto’s determination.<sup>29</sup>

## United States Policy

During the Cold War the US government remained focused on containing communism. A proven communist killer, Suharto remained in US favor throughout the 1970s and 1980s. As a tangible symbol of this support, approximately 90 percent of military equipment used by the Indonesian military was US hardware.<sup>30</sup> When Jakarta ran low on military equipment in 1977, Pres. Jimmy Carter (1977–81) authorized an increase in arms sales from \$5.8 million in fiscal year 1977 to \$112 million in fiscal year 1978.<sup>31</sup> This investment supported Suharto’s efforts to free Southeast Asia of communism and omitted any requirement for US troops in the region. Provided Suharto remained in power, US support for Indonesia was practically assured.

The lack of information regarding the East Timor situation, particularly in the form of newsworthy images, meant that by the end of 1976 the issue of human rights abuses in East Timor had disappeared from US press coverage. This suited the US Department of State, which sought to distance itself from the problem. This was reflected in its 1977 *Human Rights Report* that failed to mention the situation in East Timor.<sup>32</sup> A 1977 report to Congress did state

that approximately 2,000 East Timorese had recently been killed, but it added most of the killing was a result of civil war. By the close of the 1970s, the US Congress had little information regarding the situation on the ground.<sup>33</sup>

In 1981 US president Ronald Reagan (1981–89) was elected to office as a symbol of revitalized US power. His foreign policy would shift away from the Carter administration's focus on human rights and move back toward the 1960s notions of US global strength and power.<sup>34</sup> The US continued to funnel this strength into Indonesia's security efforts in Southeast Asia. During Reagan's administration, military sales to Indonesia peaked at over \$1 billion in 1982–84.<sup>35</sup> President Reagan and then Pres. George H. W. Bush (1989–93) continued to supply weapons, multilateral financing, and military training to the Indonesians throughout the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> Priority was placed on achieving stability in the region; everything else came second.<sup>37</sup>

Achieving this stability allowed US resources to be focused on more important Cold War activities. The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was one such activity. Presidents Carter and Reagan concluded the Soviet army was invading Afghanistan with eyes toward capturing Middle East oil fields. The United States began to build bases in the Middle East and supplied billions of dollars in arms to Afghans fighting the Soviets. In other global events, the United States began to supply military hardware to Iraq after its 1980 invasion of Iran.<sup>38</sup> Following these events, Reagan's policies included aid to anti-communist rebels in Nicaragua, the toppling of a communist government in Grenada, and the pursuit of broad policies to bring down the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup> US resources were spread thinly; only a strong argument from an influential nation could convince the United States that resources were best served supporting East Timor.

### Australian Policy

*If you want to preserve your power in the state and your state among others, then you may be justified in doing things often termed unscrupulous.*

—Kenneth Waltz  
*Man, the State, and War*

In the post-Vietnam era, Australia adopted a self-reliant military strategy supporting an independent foreign policy. This is reflected in the bilateral nature of the 1970s and 1980s diplomacy between Australia and Indonesia. No longer did Britain or the United States speak for Australia. However, as

outlined in chapter 2, *great powers dominate and stabilize the international system*. Accordingly, Australia's disapproval of the US-endorsed Indonesian invasion was met with unyielding US resistance. In January 1976 the Australian ambassador to Indonesia cabled Canberra explaining that the Australian government had a choice:

Between a moral stance, based on condemnation of Indonesia for the invasion of East Timor . . . on the one hand, and a pragmatic and realistic acceptance of the longer term inevitabilities of the situation, on the other hand. It's a choice between what might be described as Wilsonian idealism or Kissingerian realism. The former is more proper and principled but the longer term national interest may well be better served by the latter. We do not think we can have it both ways.<sup>40</sup>

In August 1976 US officials urged an indecisive Australian government to maintain good relations with Indonesia. The United States argued the annexation was "a matter of direct strategic significance to US interests."<sup>41</sup> Predictably, by late 1976 Australia began abstaining from UN resolutions against Indonesia. Australia then officially announced *de facto* recognition of Indonesia's sovereignty in East Timor. The Australian government remained critical of the way Indonesia had behaved in 1975 but concluded the invasion could not be undone.<sup>42</sup> The long-term pragmatism suggested by Australia's ambassador to Indonesia, Richard Woolcott, had been adopted as Australia's policy toward East Timor.

Nations supporting East Timor, human rights activists, and minority groups continued to pressure the Australian government. To quell the discontent, Australia sent former Australian prime minister Whitlam as an envoy to Dili in 1981. He stayed for a brief period, reporting verbatim the information supplied to him by Jakarta. He concluded the conditions in East Timor were superior to those existing prior to the 1975 invasion.<sup>43</sup> Australia continued to support Indonesia, and over the next decade sought ever-closer ties. However, behind the scenes, there remained a festering disagreement both within and between Australia's two main political parties. The decision to take Woolcott's pragmatic option over a moral stance was not universally backed. In a sign of things to come, opposition minister John Howard condemned several aspects of the 1980s Australian approach.<sup>44</sup> A decade later, as prime minister, Howard (1996–2007) would lead the international push for East Timor's right to self-determination.

By 1988, Australia's official position developed into an acknowledgment of human rights concerns, coupled with a desire to address them from a platform of solid relations with Indonesia.<sup>45</sup> This approach inevitably opened Australia to criticism; one of the more awkward moments was in 1989, when Foreign Minister Gareth Evans flew his VIP aircraft over the Timor Sea. With



him was Ali Alatas, the Indonesian foreign minister. They drank champagne to celebrate the signing of the Timor Gap oil and gas treaty, which gave Australia effective control over the majority of oil and gas reserves beneath the Timor Sea—an area covering what, for a short period in the 1970s, was part of the East Timor exclusive economic zone. Not far below the aircraft were the graves of hundreds of thousands of East Timorese who had died under Suharto.<sup>46</sup>

### United Nations Policy

The United Nations may have been quick to react; the reaction, however, was fractured and ineffectual. Prior to 1975 few knew anything about the tiny nation.<sup>47</sup> By late 1975 intelligence on the Indonesian invasion was becoming available, and the UN General Assembly quickly voted on resolutions condemning the breach of sovereignty and calling for Indonesian troops to withdraw. The United States was an important exception; it knew of Indonesian intentions for East Timor prior to 1975. When the United Nations subsequently voted to condemn the invasion, the US abstained, sending a powerful message of support to Indonesia. When a small nation abstains, the effect is not very profound; when the regional hegemon and permanent member of the Security Council abstains, the effect is seismic. The Australians, who initially supported the UN resolutions, were urged by the United States to stop supporting calls for an Indonesian withdrawal. Portugal remained stoic, continuing to request UN sanctions.<sup>48</sup> Indonesia reveled in the disagreement and confusion, accelerating efforts to annex East Timor, thus insuring Indonesia against a more coordinated UN effort.

The United Nations failed to acquire information that might have repaired its fractured resolve. The 1976 resolutions specifically urged the Indonesians to withdraw troops without delay. Indonesia countered by insisting there were no troops *to* withdraw. The uniformed men in Timor were apparently volunteers requested by indigenous anti-Fretilin forces. In an attempt to gather conclusive information, the secretary-general dispatched a special envoy to East Timor. Suharto restricted the UN envoy to Indonesian-controlled areas of Timor, ensuring Fretilin could not be contacted. The envoy's report to the United Nations was useless, soliciting more questions than it answered. Despite the confusion, the United Nations persisted, passing 10 resolutions between 1975 and 1982. All of the resolutions supported East Timor's right to self-determination. In 1983 the UN Commission on Human Rights also condemned the abuses in East Timor and called for self-determination.<sup>49</sup> In the

end, no UN resolutions were enforced, and by the mid-1980s the East Timor issue had lost momentum.<sup>50</sup>

As the regional hegemon and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the US response heavily influenced UN negotiations. Abstaining from the vote sent a powerful message: the US did not object to Indonesia's treatment of East Timor. Even if a UN resolution were passed, who in the region would provide the military power to enforce the resolutions? Australia may have been in a position to reinforce Fretilin, but it had already been urged by the United States to change its position.<sup>51</sup> Indonesia knew that US abstention meant military enforcement of UN resolutions was unlikely.

Despite the lack of UN action, East Timor maintained a tenuous existence. By refusing to recognize Indonesian annexation of the tiny nation, the United Nations made a contribution to the survival of East Timor, providing hope to the Fretilin resistance and a platform for vocal activists such as Ramos-Horta. While international law may have proved ineffectual in upholding the rights of the East Timorese, it did ensure the issue of East Timor remained open.<sup>52</sup>

## Analysis

It is difficult to evaluate the decision making of state actors in the 1970s and 1980s. We now have considerable detail regarding what transpired in Timor four decades ago. It is therefore easy to be critical of the decision makers. However, in the late 1970s and 1980s the Indonesians maintained North Korean-like secrecy in East Timor. In the 1970s Indonesia's propaganda was not only fabricated, it was also fed to the international community in a slow stream of puzzling statements. Over the ensuing decades, governments, non-governmental organizations, authors, and journalists gained enough accurate information to piece the puzzle together more precisely. However, for the initial years following the invasion, the disinformation coming from East Timor had profound effect. Significant elements of the international community believed the Indonesians were helping the East Timorese. Further complicating matters, the East Timorese voted for incorporation with Indonesia—albeit with a gun to their heads—and from June 1976 Suharto made it clear East Timor would be managed within Indonesian sovereign borders.

The Indonesian strategy included a Timor media blackout, the proliferation of state propaganda, and the brutal military control of the Timorese population. This strategy created an international smoke screen. With the implicit support of the United States, Suharto held the United Nations in contempt, giving the institution enough information to maintain its members in a

perpetual state of confusion. The lack of media attention and scarcity of non-Indonesian aid agencies on the ground meant international awareness of the situation was minimal. Stories leaking from the island were aggressively disputed by Jakarta, and with no third party telling the true story, confusion reigned. Accurate figures regarding loss of life were one example. An Indonesian church organization released the first death toll in 1979, four years after the invasion. Although probably unrelated, this release coincided with international media attention turning to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Further, Jakarta immediately disputed the figure, arguing that more than half the quoted numbers were Timorese escaping Fretilin. In essence, Suharto did enough to ensure there was insufficient momentum to generate an international backlash.

The United States was in this way responsible for the inaction in East Timor. In the same manner, the United States was responsible for many tragedies. When the United States made international decisions, there were positive consequences for many countries and adverse consequences for others. When viewed in isolation, criticism rightly flows for US policy in Southeast Asia and the resultant impact on East Timor. Indonesian troops were clearly no match for the US military. How could the leader of the free world allow the brutality to happen? Those standing in the streets of Dili as their families were massacred probably pondered that question. However, when viewed contextually, empathy for the US position surfaces. In the 1970s and 1980s, the scale of US international commitments was formidable. The United States, like many countries, was making difficult choices in a world of finite resources. It could not protect every man, woman, and child suffering in a human tragedy. Nor could it be held responsible for all the actions of every government it supported.

In the 1980s international politics was consumed by the ideological battle between communism and capitalism, or East versus West. The Soviets threatened the very existence of liberal democracy. At a macro level, diverting resources away from this battle was counterproductive. Suharto had significantly bolstered anticommunism in Southeast Asia. ASEAN had taken his lead, and other states, including Australia and New Zealand, welcomed his behavior in the region. While the situation in East Timor was regrettable, it was not sufficient to warrant isolating Indonesia. The United States supported Suharto because the benefits outweighed the costs by a significant margin. Any country trying to reverse the US position faced an uphill battle explaining why that cost/benefit analysis was flawed.

Without US support, the Australians lacked the capacity to influence Suharto on East Timor. As months turned into years, the Indonesian position in East Timor became entrenched; ameliorating this situation became

correspondingly difficult. As a strong ally, Australia had the capacity to influence US decision making. But this capacity had limits, and the East Timor situation exceeded them. For Australia, condemning the United States and Indonesia would achieve nothing, serving only to damage Australia's reputation as an influential international player.

The Australians chose to support the Indonesian government fully; an independent East Timor was seen as a lost cause. Much has been made of Australia's decision to quash postinvasion condemnation of Suharto; however, it had little choice. As noted in chapter 2, prior to the invasion, Australia outlined to Suharto that the use of force would damage the Australia–Indonesia relationship. When Suharto used force, Australia condemned the invasion within the UN framework. Australia rightly acknowledged the significance of subsequent pressure from the United States and Indonesia, strategically crucial countries for Australia's security situation. Australia accepted the irreversible nature of the invasion and the paradox of supporting UN condemnation while at the same time seeking stronger security ties with United States and Indonesia.

Was there a missed window of opportunity for the Australians to alter the course of East Timor history? Hypothetically, reversing Australia's position on East Timor reveals the enormity of such a task. The United States determined the fate of the East Timorese through its support for Indonesia. Just as assessed in the previous chapter, the most effective way for Australia to influence US decision making was to (1) *realign* established great power policy in line with regional objectives, (2) be *willing* to offer viable solutions to pursue these objectives, and, (3) be capable of *executing* combat missions in support of these objectives.

First, the Australians would have had to convince the United States it had self-interest in supporting the Fretilin resistance. Essentially, Australia could have argued US security interests were better served by compelling Suharto to withdraw forces as opposed to allowing them to stay in place. One potential avenue for change was an Australian appeal to the United States regarding fabricated Indonesian intelligence prior to the invasion. By the early 1980s it was becoming clear that Suharto's assurances to Ford regarding East Timor communism were inaccurate, as were the claims that no Indonesian soldiers were in the country; the international community had been duped. Australia would have had to argue this was a travesty requiring rectification. Unfortunately, this avenue would have still failed to support US core policy. The United States was unlikely to move resources from the communist struggle to an archipelago where there was now no communist threat. Further, what would Suharto's response to Australia's claims have been? Most likely he

would have disputed them, arguing the communist threat was only one aspect of his justification—pointing again to the abandonment of East Timor by Portugal and the need to stabilize the region. Suharto remained strategically important to consecutive 1980s US administrations; invalidating this importance would have required a stronger argument than a quest to correct an intelligence error.

Australia could also have appealed to the tragic humanitarian situation in East Timor. Indonesia was not only incapable of addressing the East Timorese tragedy, it also appeared to be contributing to it. After years of violence, the East Timorese deserved an UN-supervised vote on the issue of self-determination. This is a stronger case, taking advantage of existing UN resolutions calling for Indonesian withdrawal. For the case to be argued effectively, the humanitarian situation would have had to be accurately ascertained. But Suharto had no obligation to allow UN envoys into his territory. The UN Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was not established until 2005. In the 1980s there were no UN laws extending beyond breaches of sovereignty. Regardless of whether the United Nations recognized it, as far as Suharto was concerned, East Timor was Indonesian territory. This would not have ruled out UN action; however, it complicated matters. If Suharto failed to invite the UN peacekeeping force to enter East Timor, he could rightly argue the United Nations was invading.

Envisaging a situation where Suharto would have extended an invitation to the United Nations, without being pressured by the United States, is incomprehensible. Even if the Australians somehow managed to compel the United States to remove Indonesian support, it is doubtful the United States would have pushed its leverage beyond diplomatic rhetoric. While the United States had plenty of leverage over the Indonesians—supplying financial aid and the bulk of Indonesian military equipment—the United States knew the Soviets were seeking new arms markets too. In the Cold War, diplomatic leverage worked both ways.

The only other hope for the East Timorese was the release of graphic footage depicting the Indonesian atrocities. The East Timor population lacked food and water, but no one owned video cameras. Footage of the atrocities would have required journalists in country. Indonesia had banned foreign reporters from East Timor; those who chose to ignore the ban had a habit of disappearing. The treatment of the Balibo Five attested to this. Despite the Catholic Church's efforts to highlight the situation, the East Timorese population, the United Nations, and crusaders such as Ramos-Horta, triggering media coverage capable of sparking change remained ephemeral.

Creating momentum for US change was beyond Australia's capacity. Indonesia was an anticommunist Asian powerhouse. Suharto was in favor with US administrations, and the United States was focused on problems beyond

Southeast Asia—the Iran–Iraq War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the broader fight to contain communism. The United States had little incentive to invest in East Timor. Australia, although an influential regional country and strong US ally, was wise not to expend political capital in pursuit of the impossible.

The above analysis addresses the first criteria of the chapter 2 framework and reveals Australia had no capacity to realign established great-power policy with regional objectives. The second and third aspects of the framework can be addressed concurrently. It is reasonable to assume Australia was capable of offering a military solution to securing the eastern half of Timor. It is also reasonable to assume Australia's commitment to its 1980s defense budget and recent history fighting insurgent and conventional forces in Vietnam meant Australia was capable of executing a combat mission in East Timor. However, this latent ability to offer solutions and execute missions would require the opening of a window of opportunity. Provided the Cold War continued, there was little chance of this happening.

There was no window of opportunity available for Australia to alter the East Timor situation between 1976 and the end of the Cold War. Like many small countries, Australia simply lacked the capacity to influence US decision making. Remaining indifferent to the East Timorese fate, while tragic, provided Australia with continuing strong relations with the United States and amicable relations with Indonesia. This allowed Australia to enter the post-Cold War period in an influential position. As history would demonstrate, Australia took advantage of excess US capacity in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse to make East Timor eventually a US priority.

This bleak conclusion of the Cold War era takes nothing away from a tragic reality: throughout the 1980s the East Timor people were not protected from a flagrant disregard of international law. Unfortunately, from an international-relations perspective, it comes as no surprise that international law is disregarded in the face of strong geopolitical forces.<sup>53</sup>

The next chapter investigates events following the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the end of the Cold War, Indonesia lost diplomatic value as anti-communist partner of the United States. As reports of Indonesian atrocities continued into the 1990s, the United States, Australia, and the United Nations once again had ample opportunity to revisit their inaction over East Timor.

#### Notes

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2. Dunn, *East Timor*, 277.

3. Kiernan, "Cover-up and Denial of Genocide," 173.
4. Dunn, *East Timor*, 292.
5. *Ibid.*, 245.
6. *Ibid.*, 253, 260.
7. Carey and Bentley, *East Timor at the Crossroads*, 97.
8. Dunn, *East Timor*, 271.
9. *Ibid.*, 283.
10. Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerrilla*, 207.
11. Dunn, *East Timor*, 274.
12. Kiernan, "Cover-up and Denial of Genocide," 173.
13. Dunn, *East Timor*, 287.
14. Tanter, Selden, and Shalom, *Bitter Flowers, Sweet Flowers*, 155.
15. Dunn, *East Timor*, 298.
16. *Ibid.*, 155, 265.
17. *Ibid.*, 254–55.
18. *Ibid.*, 268–269, 294.
19. Ben Kiernan, "War, Genocide, and Resistance in East Timor, 1975–99: Comparative Reflections on Cambodia," in *War and State Terrorism: The United States, Japan, and the Asia-Pacific in the Long Twentieth Century*, edited by Mark Seldon and Alvin Y. So (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 222, [http://gsp.yale.edu/sites/default/files/03-263\\_ch\\_09.pdf](http://gsp.yale.edu/sites/default/files/03-263_ch_09.pdf).
20. Dunn, *East Timor*, 257.
21. Tanter, Selden, and Shalom, *Bitter Flowers, Sweet Flowers*, 139.
22. Jerry Sweeney, "A Matter of Small Consequence, U.S. Foreign Policy and the Tragedy of East Timor," *Independent Review* 7, no. n.1 (Summer 2002), 96.
23. Dunn, *East Timor*, 152.
24. *Ibid.*, 250.
25. *Ibid.*
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27. General Assembly, United Nations, "General Assembly Resolutions (1975-1982)," *East Timor and Indonesia Action Network* (website), n.d., <http://etan.org/etun/genasRes.htm>.
28. Pinto and Jardine, *Inside the East Timor Resistance*, 238.
29. Dunn, *East Timor*, 331.
30. Robinson, "If You Leave Us Here," 163.
31. Pinto and Jardine, *Inside the East Timor Resistance*, 22.
32. Kiernan, "Cover-up and Denial of Genocide," 173.
33. Dunn, *East Timor*, 311–13.
34. Joyce P. Kaufman, *A Concise History of U.S. Foreign Policy*, Kindle ed., (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).
35. Dunn, *East Timor*, 314.
36. Tanter, Selden, and Shalom, *Bitter Flowers, Sweet Flowers*, 164.
37. Pinto and Jardine, *Inside the East Timor Resistance*, 22.
38. Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele, "The Oily Americans," *Time Magazine*, 13 May 2003, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,450997-92,00.html>.
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## THE COLD WAR YEARS, 1976–89

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41. Ishizuka, *Australia's Policy towards East Timor*, 274.
42. Ibid., 275.
43. Dunn, *East Timor*, 287.
44. Tanter, Selden, and Shalom, *Bitter Flowers, Sweet Flowers*, 179.
45. Ishizuka, *Australia's Policy towards East Timor*, 276.
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47. Dunn, *East Timor*, 318.
48. Sweeney, "A Matter of Small Consequence," 96.
49. Dunn, *East Timor*, 318–19, 325.
50. Pinto and Jardine, *Inside the East Timor Resistance*, 241.
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53. Ibid., 153.



## Chapter 5

### **The Post–Cold War Years, 1989–99**

Indonesia's president Suharto invaded East Timor in 1975, ostensibly to prevent communism spreading in the Indonesian archipelago. The end of the Cold War and the survival of the East Timor resistance provided pause for thought. If global communism were in retreat, then perhaps the East Timorese were no longer a security threat. For Suharto, the geopolitical context was inconsequential. East Timor was part of Indonesia, and that was not going to change. Throughout the 1990s, Portugal and the United Nations provided a voice for the East Timorese independence movement, but the trio was little match for Indonesian opposition. Their opponent was powerful for two reasons: the United Nations would not commit troops on Indonesian sovereign territory without an invitation, and the Indonesians were supported by Australia and the United States. If the East Timorese were going to prevail in their struggle for independence, at the very least, they would need the United States to support them. In a strange twist of fate, the Asian financial crisis triggered the changes they needed.

#### **Events in East Timor**

*To resist is to win.*

—Xanana Gusmão

The end of the Cold War significantly altered the strategic situation in Southeast Asia. The 1989 revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe signaled that communist expansion had ended. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant US power dwarfed its nearest competitor. China remained influential in Southeast Asia; but America's Pacific allies included Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand. In the 1990s, the United States wielded more unilateral power than any country had in centuries, and its allies reinforced this dominance. The spread of communism had been halted. As a result, the US desire for support from nonallied regional countries was commensurably diminished. Countries such as Indonesia were in this category, as their only tangible commonality with the United States had been a zealous aversion to communism, and their stand no longer trumped human rights abuses.

The end of the Cold War may have altered the geopolitical landscape, but it changed little for the East Timorese. The Indonesians continued with their brutality, persisting with the resettlement program and diluting the East Timorese population. Indonesian civilians, enticed by government-provided land and employment, moved into East Timor in the tens of thousands.<sup>1</sup> In the early 1990s, the TNI regularly warned the local populations that any protest against integration with Indonesia would result in their being shot. For the indigenous population, life in Dili was a life of fear. Dozens of army bases and torture houses—designed to break the will of the East Timor resistance—littered the community.<sup>2</sup>

The resistance movement provided domestic hope for the East Timorese and an organization to which Portugal, the United Nations, and human rights groups could rally. By the 1990s, the Fretilin's Falintil fighters were a diminished insurgency, yet their persistent struggle meant the jungle remained contested terrain for the TNI, which rarely ventured there. Although Fretilin maintained links to the resettlement villages and underground networks in most towns, by 1999 only 200 Falintil fighters remained in remote jungle hideouts.<sup>3</sup> Still, their survival was more important than their numbers. To its international supporters, Falintil symbolized the East Timorese struggle, while the Fretilin leaders represented the government in waiting.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, with scant media coverage and little political momentum, the wait seemed interminable.

The November 1991 Santa Cruz massacre triggered some momentum for the resistance. An East Timorese memorial procession had been organized to commemorate the killing of a pro-independence youth, Sebastião Gomes, by the TNI. The procession turned into an anti-integration demonstration. At one point, Indonesian soldiers were ordered to fire into the demonstration without warning. The crowd fled into the nearby Santa Cruz cemetery, where the soldiers commenced bayoneting and shooting the protesters. In all, 271 were killed, 382 wounded, and 250 were reported missing.<sup>5</sup> US journalists Allan Nairn and Amy Goodman were present while the TNI conducted the slaughter. The soldiers attacked Nairn and Goodman but spared their lives. After the violence, Nairn recalled that Gen Try Sutrisno, the national commander of the Indonesian Armed Forces, stated, "These Timorese are disrupters; such people must be shot . . . and we will shoot them."<sup>6</sup> Footage emerged of the indiscriminate violence administered by the Indonesian troops. When combined with the stories of Nairn and Goodman, it made for powerful journalism. The story of the massacre triggered a contentious international debate, breathing life into the struggle for independence.<sup>7</sup>

As international momentum developed, Xanana Gusmão and José Ramos-Horta emerged as the international symbols of East Timorese resistance. Gusmão, leader of Fretilin, had united the sectarian elements that sparked the 1975 civil war. He sought to focus the Timorese on national unity, not on any particular ideology.<sup>8</sup> He established the National Council of Maubere Resistance (CNRM) and appointed Ramos-Horta as the representative of CNRM abroad. The increased press coverage from the Santa Cruz massacre combined with Ramos-Horta's efforts to improve levels of foreign aid and involvement from human rights organizations.<sup>9</sup>

In this way, East Timor's plight received heightened international attention throughout the 1990s. In 1992 the Indonesians arrested Gusmão for subversion and sentenced him to life in a Javanese prison. His capture and detention further inspired the East Timor resistance—many drawing similarities to the unifying effect of Nelson Mandela's imprisonment in South African.<sup>10</sup> In 1996 the resistance leader Ramos-Horta and Acting Bishop of Dili Carlos Belo were jointly award the Nobel Peace Prize for their "work towards a just and peaceful solution to the conflict in East Timor."<sup>11</sup>

The Nobel recognition further publicized the East Timorese plight, contradicting Indonesian claims that no conflict existed. The persuasiveness of Ramos-Horta's legal and moral argument drew attention to the basic denial of East Timorese human rights. More importantly, these developments highlighted that due to the international community's failure to act against the 1975 invasion, the East Timorese had paid the price for the United Nations' unwillingness to uphold its charter. To placate international observers, Suharto opened East Timor's borders to limited foreign aid, although still tightly controlling journalism. Despite increasing awareness, very little real change was realized. In essence, the global political response was compassionate rhetoric. Suharto maintained his grip on power and his hold over the East Timorese.

## Indonesian Policy

*Totalitarian power is strong only if it does not have to be used too often. If totalitarian power must be used at all times against the entire population, it is unlikely to remain powerful for long.*

—Karl W. Deutsch

In 1989, for the first time since the invasion, Suharto opened East Timor's districts to foreigners.<sup>12</sup> This initiative was designed to placate international

criticism of the East Timor travel restrictions. However, far from improving the lives of the Timorese, the removal of the travel restrictions made life more dangerous. Fearing unrest during planned international visits, the TNI and police stepped up their control of the population. Prior to a planned 1991 visit by a Portuguese delegation, the military and police visited every school in East Timor telling students that anyone mounting a demonstration would be shot.<sup>13</sup> The defiance of these warnings led to numerous violent recriminations, including the Santa Cruz massacre. For the East Timorese this massacre was not out of the ordinary; the unique aspect was the film footage that made its way to international attention.

Suharto reacted to the filming of the massacres with contempt. He denied the United Nations access to his territory and refused to subject his army to an UN investigation, insisting instead that the Indonesians would conduct the inquiry. Following the trial, the Indonesian officers responsible for ordering the violence were given light sentences—many of them continuing on to higher ranks within the military. For inciting the violence, the East Timorese protestors were given heavier jail sentences.<sup>14</sup> The cynical inadequacy of the process attracted more international attention to the East Timorese cause. Ali Alatas was the Indonesian foreign minister at the time. He later acknowledged the handling of the massacre was a “turning point” for the independence movement in East Timor.<sup>15</sup> The footage and the subsequent trial shocked many nations, including those that had traditionally supported Indonesia.<sup>16</sup>

Ramos-Horta’s 1996 Nobel Peace Prize furthered the momentum stemming from the Santa Cruz massacre. Horta’s prize sent “shock waves through Jakarta’s political establishment.”<sup>17</sup> The international recognition of Ramos-Horta was an irritant for Suharto; precisely at the time Indonesia was promoting its credentials as a nation on the path to genuine democracy.<sup>18</sup>

By 1997 Indonesia’s power had begun to wane. The Asian economic crisis devastated the Indonesian economy, and Suharto’s leadership came into question. Protests and riots broke out across the archipelago; the Indonesian people were openly objecting to Suharto’s management of the country. With foreign supporters and investment turning away and his population turning against him, Suharto resigned on 21 May 1998. Vice Pres. Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie took control.<sup>19</sup> Needing to convince international friends that Indonesia was a democratic country worthy of investment, Habibie (1998–99) distanced himself from Suharto’s policies.<sup>20</sup>

Indonesia’s woes permeated deeper than changes in political leadership could counter. Habibie was immediately pressured by the International Monetary Fund to reduce spending. Military spending was singled out as an especially large burden on Jakarta’s budget, and the attractive prospect of reducing

military presence in Timor prompted Habibie to commence UN-sponsored talks with Portugal regarding East Timor's future.<sup>21</sup> In June 1998, just one month after Suharto resigned, Habibie recommended East Timor be given *special status* under Indonesian state control. In January 1999 Habibie surprised everyone by going further, stating that if East Timor would not accept Indonesian rule, he would recommend to the Indonesian People's Consultative Assembly that control of the territory be relinquished.<sup>22</sup>

In East Timor, the TNI did not agree with Habibie's plan. Fearing an independent East Timor would reveal their crimes, alarm quickly spread through TNI and police ranks. According to Australia's Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO), rather than supporting Habibie, TNI leadership "embarked on a finely judged and orchestrated strategy to retain East Timor as part of Indonesia. All necessary force was to be employed, but with maximum deniability, maintaining public adherence to Indonesian commitments under the agreement while privately subverting the process of self-determination."<sup>23</sup> Reports of violence subsequently emerged from all over East Timor. Independence leaders and their followers were attacked and killed, while stories of hand grenades being thrown into Catholic Church congregations became public. Many of those fleeing the violence were shot or attacked with machetes. In one report, DIO outlined that militants "had fired tear gas into the church and [TNI] apparently did not intervene when the pro-independence activists were attacked."<sup>24</sup> In general, the TNI and police supported the militants "as passive observers and active participants."<sup>25</sup> However, the brutality in mid-1999 was a prelude to the violent Indonesian reaction that would follow the September 1999 self-determination vote dubbed the *popular consultation*. A description of the aftermath follows the policy analysis below.

### Portuguese Policy

Portugal, like the United Nations, was able to do only a limited amount for the East Timorese. Portugal's 1975 abandonment of the colony continued to hobble its diplomatic leverage both within and outside the United Nations. Throughout the 1990s Lisbon remained tarnished as the originator of the problem. In 1991 Portugal took Australia to the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) for exploiting the Timor Gap oil and gas seabed. The Australians responded furiously to the Portuguese complaints, highlighting the hypocrisy of Portuguese colonial abandonment in 1975 followed by a defense of the *colony's* financial interests decades later.<sup>26</sup> In the wake of the Santa Cruz massacre, Portugal held a national day of mourning. The violence had occurred in

an identifiably Portuguese cemetery. Accordingly, scenes of a former colonial population being slaughtered were highly emotional for the Portuguese population.<sup>27</sup> While Portuguese efforts failed to help the Timorese directly, they did manage to raise East Timor's profile within the European Community (EC), the predecessor to the European Union. This was particularly apparent during Portugal's 1992 presidency of the European Community.<sup>28</sup> If nothing else, Portugal's dedication to its former colony served to complement the work of Gusmão and Ramos-Horta.

Portuguese lobbying efforts with the European Community and United Nations allowed them to be well positioned when Habibie offered East Timor special autonomy in 1998.<sup>29</sup> Indonesia and Portugal had participated in fruitless meetings for years while attempting to solve the East Timor issue. However, in 1997 one of these meetings discussed an autonomy option within Indonesia rule. Habibie then adopted this language in 1998, while attempting to negotiate an internationally acceptable solution.<sup>30</sup> Portugal realized it lacked the power to challenge Indonesia directly. By keeping the issue alive, however, Lisbon fulfilled a limited but useful role.

### United States Policy

*We pride ourselves, and I think properly so, in standing up for human rights.*

—Pres. George H. W. Bush, 1991

*Big countries with powerful military machines should not be permitted to invade, occupy, and brutalize their peaceful neighbors.*

—Secretary of State James Baker, 1991

*I'm very concerned about what's happened in East Timor. We have ignored it so far in ways that I think are unconscionable.*

—Pres. Bill Clinton, 1992

*No policy is advanced with the plea that, although this will hurt my country, it will help others.*

—Kenneth Waltz, 2001

In 1989, the world geopolitical structure changed from a bipolar struggle between communism and capitalism to one dominated by the United States.

Indonesia remained important, to be sure, but the collapse of the Soviet Union reduced the security value of the US-Indonesian strategic alignment.<sup>31</sup> Indonesia's successful venture into capitalism meant US economic interests filled that strategic void. However, eight years after the Cold War ended, the 1997 Asian financial crisis exposed Suharto's existence atop a pile of "crony capitalism."<sup>32</sup> With strategic and business interests waning, the United States became apathetic toward Indonesian relations. Still, it would take more than US indifference to end the East Timorese misery.

The collapse of the Soviet Union handed the United States unrivaled global power. Psychologist Abraham Maslow argues that when you have the world's largest hammer, every problem looks like a nail.<sup>33</sup> The United States had the world's largest hammer, yet Maslow's hammer was not a concept to which the United States ascribed. Post-Cold War US presidents were inclined to make the same commitment as post-World War II president John F. Kennedy. The United States could not help everyone and had to be selective when offering assistance. This selectivity was revealed early in Pres. Bill Clinton's administration. The realist approach described earlier is evident. Declassified in 2007, the 1994 Presidential Decision Directive 25 (PDD25), *Reforming Multilateral Peace Operations*, outlined the criteria for US peacekeeping operations. Clinton stipulated six conditions for troop commitment to peace operations. Two of the criteria concerned funding and command arrangements. The remaining four criteria provide insight into US reluctance to commit troops in East Timor. According to PDD25, for UN operations to qualify for US troop participation, the involvement had to advance US interests, have substantial US public support, be necessary for the success of the UN mission, and have an *end point* identified.<sup>34</sup> These criteria were clearly not met in the case of East Timor.

First, the most notable of the criteria was that the mission *must advance US interests*. Intervening in East Timor could not be shown to advance US interests in any meaningful way. Despite the reduced strategic value of Indonesia in the post-Cold War period, aspects of the US-Indonesia relationship were burgeoning. By the mid-1990s, the Indonesian economy was growing at seven percent per annum, and US business opportunities were being realized. In 1994, the Clinton administration signed a \$30 billion deal for Exxon to extract Indonesia's natural gas reserves.<sup>35</sup> When Suharto visited Washington in 1995, "the Cabinet room was jammed with top officials ready to welcome him."<sup>36</sup> Clinton made brief remarks regarding repressive Indonesian military behavior before seeking Suharto's support for open markets in Asia. A senior Clinton staff member commented that Suharto was, "... our kind of guy" and "The message of his visit was clear: this is the kind of relationship we want to

have with China.”<sup>37</sup> The Cold-War strategic value of Indonesia had been replaced by the post-war economic value of US business opportunities. US involvement in East Timorese peace-keeping operations would complicate this effort.

The second PDD25 criterion was the requirement for substantial public support for the UN operation. Amy Goodman and Allan Nairn had brought attention to the East Timor plight through their reports of the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre. However, the US twenty-four hour news cycle and the US population’s general unfamiliarity with the region meant the issue failed to permeate the conscience of the people.<sup>38</sup> There was a little more reaction in Washington. Following the Santa Cruz massacre, Congress suspended military training support for Indonesia.<sup>39</sup> However, the State Department later revealed the Indonesians had kept purchasing US training with their own funds. The US also continued arms sales to Indonesia throughout the 1990s.<sup>40</sup> To its credit, the US State Department began to report the situation in East Timor more accurately, including highlighting the torture being used to control the population.<sup>41</sup> US public support did exist in the 1990s, but there was not “domestic political and congressional support for US participation” required by the guidance in PDD25.<sup>42</sup> Henry Kissinger, US Secretary of State (1973-1977), epitomized the opinion of the US population. In 1995 he dismissed East Timor as, “a little speck in a huge archipelago.”<sup>43</sup> During the 1999 crisis, Washington’s attitude remained consistent. US National Security Adviser Sandy Berger argued the US had the same responsibility in East Timor as he had for cleaning his daughter’s apartment.<sup>44</sup>

The third criterion in PDD25 was that US participation would be necessary for the success of the mission. The US believed its presence simply was not required in Indonesia. Even during the self-determination *popular consultation*, Habibie assured the international community that Indonesia’s TNI would deter the militia and maintain security for the population. Behind the scenes, the TNI were arming and coordinating the militia, or moonlighting as the militia themselves.<sup>45</sup> This mattered little—the US decision was that Habibie did not need UN intervention to solve the East Timor problem. This conclusion held firm until almost two weeks after the post-ballot violence; Australia’s offer to rush troops to East Timor under a UN banner was not supported by the US.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, PDD25 implied that the United States would not be involved in long-term nation building. PDD25 stipulated, “an end point for U.S. participation can be identified.”<sup>47</sup> There was no *end-point* identified for East Timor during the 1990s. There was little appreciation of the problem, let alone a solution. UN planning was limited to facilitating the popular consultation for the Timorese, beyond that was the manifest enormity of rebuilding a shattered



nation. The timeframe for this was an enigma, as the UN's withdrawal from East Timor in 2013 attests.

In the light of PDD25, US involvement in UN intervention in East Timor was always unlikely. It is unsurprising that throughout the 1990s the US distance itself from East Timor. Even as the violence following the 1999 vote began to escalate, the US chose to monitor rather than become involved. Throughout the 1990s, East Timor remained absent from US national interest.

### Australian Policy

*We have to balance questions of international morality against the pragmatic acceptance of irreversible fact.*

—Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, 1990

The end of the Cold War changed little in the strategic relationship between Australia and Indonesia. Similar to the US-Indonesia relationship, business was the priority for the Australian government. While Indonesia was only Australia's tenth-largest trading partner, Australia had an interest in a strong Indonesian economy. In the wake of the Asian financial crisis, Australia clearly demonstrated its desire for a stable Indonesian economy, offering the Indonesians a \$1 billion loan.<sup>48</sup> Even the 1991 Santa Cruz massacres failed to damage the relationship. Despite international outrage at the atrocity in Dili, Gareth Evans, Australian Foreign Minister (1988-1996), described the Dili massacre as an "an aberration."<sup>49</sup> Evans' thoughts on foreign policy encapsulate Australia's approach to Indonesia for much of the 1990s.

Strident and aggressive condemnation of what to us is unconscionable behavior may be good for domestic morale—and may sometimes be the right note to strike for maximum effect, especially when accompanied by an international chorus. But more often than not, quite apart from any risk to other aspects of the relationship, this kind of approach will be counter-productive in that it will generate a wounded, defensive reaction more likely to reinforce than undermine the behavior pattern in question.<sup>50</sup>

Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating (1991-1996) made it clear that Indonesia, not East Timor, was Australia's priority. On his return from Indonesia after the Santa Cruz massacre, Keating privately advised fellow members of Parliament that "President Suharto was the best thing in strategic terms that had happened to us; by bringing stability to the archipelago he has minimized the Australian defence budget."<sup>51</sup> When the US Congress cut off Indonesian military training in the wake of the Santa Cruz massacres, Keating

pursued closer military ties with Indonesia. This included carrying out more military exercises with Indonesia than with any other country.<sup>52</sup>

In the early 1990s Indonesia's accelerating economy presented attractive opportunities for Australia. Exports to Indonesia were, "booming ... and delivering handy surpluses to Canberra."<sup>53</sup> Australians were investing in Indonesia, too. Coal, gold mining, and banking were lucrative. For their part, Indonesian companies were heavily investing in Australian property development and pastoral industries.<sup>54</sup> As a result, the Australian government was keen to get East Timor off the agenda and focus on business—in particular, the oil-rich Timor Sea area.<sup>55</sup> Evans described the Timor Gap Oil Treaty as, "the most substantial bilateral agreement ever reached between our two countries and illustrates eloquently how differences between the two systems can be overcome for our mutual benefit."<sup>56</sup> Keating took this relationship further, using his close personal relationship with Suharto as a stepping-stone toward Indonesia's first-ever bilateral security agreement, the 1995 Agreement to Maintain Security (AMS).<sup>57</sup>

While the two governments were cooperating, the Australian public's opinion of the Suharto regime was beginning to erode. By the mid 1990s, opinion polls consistently revealed doubt in the minds of ordinary Australians as to the strategic intentions of their northern neighbor.<sup>58</sup> This growing divide between Australian strategic policy and the wishes of the Australian people was reflected in processes surrounding the AMS agreement. Evans argued the agreement had to be made in secrecy, because it wasn't appropriate for negotiations to be "thrown off the rails by people getting very excited about things before it's appropriate."<sup>59</sup> Public opinion, while often inconvenient, can provide a litmus test for good public policy. Evans alluded to Australian mistakes in the 1990s when, in a frank admission in 2001, he acknowledged that some of Australia's policies in the 1990s, "helped only to produce more professional human rights abusers."<sup>60</sup>

While the Australian-Indonesian relationship remained strong under Suharto, Australia's 1994 Defence White Paper, *Defending Australia*, reflected an appreciation that the collapse of the Soviet Union had changed the geopolitical environment in Southeast Asia. With the battle to contain communism over, Australia predicted the US would no longer seek or accept responsibility for maintaining stability in the region. The obvious implication for Australian policy makers was that they needed new policies encompassing a wider range of scenarios. Accordingly, by the mid-1990s Australia was developing a military more capable of independently shaping outcomes in the region.<sup>61</sup> This development was critical to addressing the third criteria in the process outlined in Chapter 2.

In 1996, the Liberal Party's John Howard was elected prime minister. While in opposition, Howard condemned aspects of the 1980s Australian approach to the East Timor problem.<sup>62</sup> He believed the previous government had failed to manage national security effectively.<sup>63</sup> His allegiance, however, remained with the Indonesians, and from 1996 to 1998 there was little talk of reinvigorating the East Timor debate. When the Asian financial crisis took hold in 1997, Australia did not perceive a weakened Indonesia as creating a window of opportunity in East Timor. The Australian government was focused on economic concerns, and did not want instability in Indonesia to degrade prosperity in Australia.<sup>64</sup>

Between 1996 and 1998, pragmatic realism dominated the Indonesian-Australian diplomatic relationship. However, there were embryonic signs the Australian public wanted more done in East Timor. In 1997, the Australian opposition government began to passionately debate a new policy on East Timor.<sup>65</sup> By 1998 Howard found an increasing number of influential groups had become vehement in their support for the East Timorese. This included the Catholic Church, ex-military service organizations, and numerous NGOs. This new attention complemented the efforts of Jose Ramos-Horta, who had been campaigning broadly in Australia for the previous decade.<sup>66</sup> Howard welcomed the debate. He knew that if an opportunity arose to pressure the Indonesians on East Timor, then public opinion in Australia would determine his options.<sup>67</sup>

In December 1998, Howard took a bold step with Indonesia's new president. The Asian financial crisis had weakened the international image of Indonesia and eroded its power. Howard saw an opportunity to take control of the Australian narrative regarding East Timor.<sup>68</sup> In December 1998, he wrote to Habibie concerning the future of East Timor. The letter was a "catalyst for the events of 1999," but not in the way Howard intended.<sup>69</sup> Habibie reacted strongly against the letter, taking offense to the offer of help from Australia to solve the East Timor issue.<sup>70</sup> The Indonesian-Australian relationship then descended to its lowest point since the Sukarno era 30 years prior.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, Habibie's anger at Australia likely motivated him to act.

In June 1998 Habibie recommended East Timor be given *special status* under Indonesia's control. Despite there being no direct link, immediately after Howard's letter Habibie surprised the region by announcing that if East Timor would not accept Indonesian rule, the East Timorese could become independent.<sup>72</sup> As a result, the UN began preparation for the *popular consultation*. Habibie insisted the TNI and police would provide security for the event. However, in March 1999, a DIO Current Intelligence Brief revealed the strong link between the TNI and the pro-Indonesian militants operating in East

Timor. The military was not providing security. They were operating *with* the militants, including directly firing on independence supporters. The report concluded that the TNI could easily control the militants, but had chosen not to.<sup>73</sup> In April 1999, Howard pressured Habibie to allow a UN peacekeeping force to provide security for the ballot.<sup>74</sup> Habibie declined.

Howard may have taken the initiative regarding East Timor's future, but he could not provide the security it required. Australia needed support from the US in order to further pressure Habibie, but the US would not act. As noted in the previous section, committing to East Timor was not in the US national interest. For Howard, it was a disappointing time in the alliance.<sup>75</sup> As the crisis developed, the US Departments of State and Defense refused get involved. They argued that current commitments in the Iraq no-fly zone, along with recent commitments in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, meant East Timor involvement was out of the question. US national-interest did not include East Timor, and Australia lacked the capacity to alter that perception.<sup>76</sup>

### United Nations Policy

*Under the terms of the agreement signed in New York, responsibility for all aspects of security lay with the Indonesian police. And far from being the solution, the Indonesian police, along with the Indonesian Army, were the root cause of the misery that followed.*

—Kira Brunner  
*The New Killing Fields*

*The UN could have said no, and the whole thing would have been called off . . . and for the next twenty-three years, we'd have had chunks ripped out of our sides for the great opportunity that we'd thrown up. But we didn't, and we're here. The system's not perfect, in fact it's terrible, and God knows what's going to happen before this is over. But it will get done, and whatever happens, the world will see it.*

—UN Staff Member  
East Timor, 1999

UN leaders pledged to make the 1990s a decade of change in the observance of international human rights.<sup>77</sup> Accordingly, the post-Cold War years contained numerous UN efforts to negotiate a solution between Portugal, Indonesia, and the people of East Timor. Despite failing to *solve* the East Timor crisis for over two decades, the UN refused to give up on the Timorese. The

UN partnered with Portugal to keep the East Timor independence debate unresolved, and without these efforts the East Timor resistance may have faded into obscurity.

In the early 1990s, UN efforts to assist East Timor failed with tragic, yet important consequences. In October 1991 a Portuguese parliamentary delegation, working with the resistance, was scheduled to visit Dili as part of the UN tripartite process. This process was aimed at Indonesia, Portugal, and the UN finding a solution to East Timor. The local Timorese had planned an independence demonstration to coincide with the visit. The Portuguese cancelled at short notice, and the visit was abandoned. However, the TNI was informed of the planned demonstration. The TNI killed pro-independence Sebastião Gomes the next day in retribution. The demonstration planned for the Portuguese delegation was replaced with a march to Sebastião's place of rest—what followed was the Santa Cruz massacre. The footage of the massacre shocked the international community. The UN's *decade of change* had clearly not extended to East Timor. The UN Commission on Human Rights quickly passed a resolution critical of Indonesian practices in East Timor; but the declaration proved hollow once again, as there was no protection offered to the Timorese. Despite no change in the security environment, East Timor had become the subject of an international political debate. The European Parliament, the US, Canada, and the Netherlands were compelled either to condemn Indonesia or suspend aid.<sup>78</sup>

The international backlash from the Santa Cruz massacres quickly subsided, but the UN persisted in its efforts to negotiate a solution. In 1995 UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali initiated a process to promote a dialogue among East Timorese. The forum was designed to allow East Timorese of all shades of political opinion to explore ideas for improving the situation.<sup>79</sup> In 1997 the new UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, persuaded Indonesia and Portugal to begin talks on East Timor. UN troubleshooter Jamsheed Marker of Pakistan took the lead, while Annan involved himself heavily, meeting with the foreign ministers of Indonesia and Portugal on a regular basis.<sup>80</sup> Again, nothing eventuated from the dialogue, other than enriching the debate. There was a lot of talking, but little action. It appeared that gross violations of human rights alone were insufficient fuel for action.

The Asian financial crisis emerged in July 1997, and the subsequent fall of Suharto led to greater UN involvement in East Timor. In June 1998 Habibie proposed autonomy for East Timor on condition the territory accepted integration into Indonesia. East Timorese resistance leaders initially rejected the proposal. However, the UN stepped in to sponsor subsequent negotiations. Annan and the Foreign Ministers of Indonesia and Portugal held in-

depth discussions on Indonesia's proposals for a special status based on a wide-ranging autonomy for East Timor. In January 1999 Habibie announced the East Timorese could have their independence, and in March Annan announced the UN would supervise the ballot. The East Timorese could either accept or reject the Indonesian proposal.<sup>81</sup>

Habibie appeared more interested in the façade of addressing the East Timor issue than constructing an executable plan. As the UN focus intensified, the Indonesian government appeared unprepared for the international scrutiny surrounding the autonomy proposal. Habibie's assurance that troop numbers in East Timor would be reduced was undermined by leaked military documents stating that troop numbers had not been cut. In fact, they had been marshaled to attack pro-independence forces.<sup>82</sup> The UN then received reports of unopposed militia groups rounding up East Timorese into refugee camps. In what many saw as an extraordinary move, the UN charged the Indonesians with providing security for the autonomy vote. The UN felt it had little choice—without an invitation from Habibie it could not deploy security forces on Indonesian sovereign territory.<sup>83</sup> The Indonesian agreement did, however, provide a mandate for the UN to play a role in the post-ballot transition to independence.<sup>84</sup>

To many, the plan for a UN-supervised vote appeared better than no vote at all. Accordingly, on 11 June 1999 the UN approved establishment of the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET). The mission was not armed and had no security role.<sup>85</sup> On 30 August 1999 almost the entire population of East Timor came out to vote. On 4 September 1999 Annan announced that 78.5 per cent of East Timorese wanted independence.<sup>86</sup> When the results were made public, militia violence erupted.<sup>87</sup>

## Window of Opportunity

*If any of us had an inkling that it was going to be this chaotic, I don't think anyone would have gone forward. We are not fools.*

—UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan  
10 September 1999

There was eight days of violence following the independence vote before international condemnation overwhelmed Habibie. The glaringly positive aspect of the violence was the international political momentum ensuing from it—impetus that had been absent for 24 years. The UN, US, Australia, and others combined to bring overwhelming diplomatic pressure on Habibie.

Predictably, US leverage over Indonesia was the decisive factor within this process.

Based on their pre-ballot behavior, the TNI, police, and militia should have been expected to destabilize the post-ballot environment. However, there were few who could have predicted the scale of the ensuing disaster. The TNI organized, trained, and equipped militias commenced a wave of violence that reduced much of the country to burning ashes.<sup>88</sup> Hundreds of East Timorese were killed, thousands fled into the hills, tens of thousands were forcibly moved across the border to Indonesia's West Timor, while hundreds of thousands abandoned their homes.<sup>89</sup> UNAMET was forced, on security grounds, to evacuate 12 of its 13 regional centers. All surviving UN staff took shelter in Dili's UN compound, while attempting to protect as many East Timorese as could fit inside the walls. Annan was appalled by the violence, calling on the TNI to restore order. Habibie assured him it would, but it was clear he had lost control.<sup>90</sup> Unlike the decades of violence preceding it, numerous foreign journalists, international NGOs, church organizations, and the UN staff supervising the ballot witnessed the horror of the 1999 violence. The substantial media coverage triggered outrage around the globe.<sup>91</sup>

Despite swelling global support for action, the harsh reality remained that Indonesia was sovereign territory and the UN could not deploy armed peacekeepers until Indonesia agreed to the mission. The international audience could protest all it liked, but until Habibie accepted an offer for help, the window of opportunity for East Timor was closed.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan emerged as an important player in the peacekeeping standoff between Habibie and the international community. As the violence continued unchecked, Habibie refused to let UN troops into the country—insisting that Indonesia was handling the situation. Annan vehemently disagreed, phoning numerous world leaders to garner support. As the violence in East Timor increased, Annan escalated the rhetoric against Habibie, at one stage warning that he, “cannot escape responsibility for what could amount ... to crimes against humanity.”<sup>92</sup>

From 1975-1999 Indonesia had weathered numerous UN resolutions condemning their behavior. Experience had shown that stalling, deception, and denial were the most effective tools for Indonesia. This time, however, the UN Secretary-General was determined to back up rhetoric with force. Two days after the ballot, the UN inquired whether Australia could contribute to a UN peacekeeping force. Howard replied that Australia not only wanted to contribute, Australians wanted to lead the mission.<sup>93</sup> He offered to rush troops to the island under the UN banner, but China and the United States would not support a UN intervention.<sup>94</sup> Behind the scenes, Howard had taken a personal

role in rallying support from the international community. Howard's Chief of Army, General Frank Hickling, was dispatched to garner regional military support while the Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, used the fortuitously timed Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in New Zealand to convince regional leaders of the need to act.<sup>95</sup> On 10 September 1999, the Secretary-General urged the Indonesian government to accept this offer of assistance from Australia and several other governments, including New Zealand, the Philippines and Malaysia.<sup>96</sup> Habibie was unmoved, refusing to yield to international pressure.<sup>97</sup> There was only one reason for this refusal. Intervention was still not in America's national interest.

The US did not support UN intervention in East Timor until 12 September 1999.<sup>98</sup> East Timor had not been in the US national interest for the past 24 years, and President Clinton remained reluctant to change this posture.<sup>99</sup> The Australians interpreted this reluctance as a shortcoming. Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer commented that the US "could not have been weaker in its initial response to Australia's request for assistance with East Timor during September 1999."<sup>100</sup> Australia's Minister for Defence, John Moore, contacted his counterpart, US Secretary of Defense William Cohen, requesting the US change its position and support East Timor. Moore argued the US was obligated to assist under the terms of the ANZUS treaty. Cohen was unmoved, reiterating there would be "no [US] troops" in East Timor.<sup>101</sup> Moore advised Howard of the development, who chose to circumvent the US Secretary of Defense and speak to Clinton directly at the 9-12 September 1999 APEC summit. During the Howard-Clinton discussions, the President acknowledged the US would have to do something *for Australia*.<sup>102</sup>

The US President subsequently phoned Habibie. Clinton indicated he would consider economic sanctions if the UN peacekeepers were not permitted to stop the violence. Later, at an APEC press conference, Clinton stated, "My own willingness to support future [Indonesian] assistance will depend very strongly on the way Indonesia handles this situation."<sup>103</sup> The international community had been ready for weeks. A single US phone call ended the waiting.

After 24 years of struggle, the East Timorese received the news that Habibie had formally requested a peacekeeping force be sent to East Timor.<sup>104</sup> On 15 September 1999, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1264 providing Chapter VII mandate for the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET).<sup>105</sup>

Ironically, Habibie's reasoning for allowing the East Timor ballot was to improve the international perception of Indonesia. In the wake of the Asian financial crisis, and the fall of Suharto, Habibie was desperate to advertise Indonesia as a developing democracy with a legitimate government—a country worthy of investment. His handling of the East Timor crisis could not have



been more damaging. Nine months after the ballot was proposed, the situation in East Timor revealed how little Indonesian democracy had progressed. The farcical nature of its conduct rallied the world in defense of the East Timorese. In an embarrassing admission to his own country, on 12 September 1999, Habibie announced that INTERFET would arrive to restore order in East Timor. Participants in the INTERFET military coalition would be Australia, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Fiji, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Malaysia, Mozambique, New Zealand, Norway, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom, and, perhaps most importantly, the United States.<sup>106</sup>

The TNI agreed to hand East Timor's security to INTERFET with little resistance. There were a handful of skirmishes between peacekeepers and the militia before the militia faded away. By 25 October 1999 INTERFET was no longer required, and the UN established a mandate for the United Nations Administration in East Timor (UNTAET).<sup>107</sup> For the first time in its history, the UN was administering an entire country.<sup>108</sup> By May 2002, the East Timorese had elected a new government and declared their country to be the fully independent Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

## Analysis

Australian support for military intervention in East Timor took 24 years to develop. Unfettered by the great power dynamics of the Cold War, the 1990s demonstrated that smaller powers, including the UN, still had difficulty influencing international politics without the assistance of a hegemon—particularly when the persecuted are trapped within the borders of a sovereign state.

Australia's role in the 24-year East Timor crisis has been much maligned for its lack of action and inconsistency. However, as noted in the conclusions of Chapters 3 and 4, increasing the diplomatic pressure against Indonesia would have altered nothing for the East Timorese, instead serving only to weaken Australia. To be sure, Australian policy has been bombarded by criticism regarding most aspects of its involvement with East Timor. On one extreme is criticism for a failure to act—on the other extreme is criticism for acting. The former is expected—the latter predominately focused on the 1999 involvement.

On one side is the argument that Australia's failure to push for UN security surrounding the ballot was tantamount to international neglect. Professor William Maley, Director of the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy, states Australia's East Timor policies were a "massive failure of analysis and constitute

Australia's equivalent of the bungling which saw Pearl Harbor open to attack on 7 December 1941."<sup>109</sup> Richard Leaver, a contributor to *The Pacific Review* and lecturer at Flinders University states that "Howard's about-face was therefore public testament to a massive failure of past Australian policy."<sup>110</sup> This theme of failure abounds in the scrutiny of Australia's approach to East Timor.

This style of analysis overestimates Australia's capacity to influence international decision making. East Timor was not Australia's Pearl Harbor, nor was it a failure of policy. Australia understood what was happening in East Timor—it was powerless to stop it. Many countries lack the power to influence international relations in the manner they wish. This state of affairs does not represent a failure of policy. Howard's letter to Habibie is one example in which Australian pressure on Indonesia only served to worsen the relationship. The Indonesians were resisting anyone meddling in their internal problems. Influencing this situation was beyond Australia's capacity.

If Australia, or any state, wanted to alter the East Timorese plight in the 1990s, it needed US support. Unfortunately for the Timorese, the US viewed them as a tiny speck in a big archipelago, a metaphorical mess in a distant university student's apartment. East Timor had no strategic or economic value, and the US had bigger global problems to address. The US was aware of human rights abuses, but thought them to be not worthy of removing "our kind of guy."<sup>111</sup> If it were to be drawn into action, the US needed a better reason than human rights abuses in a forgotten corner of Southeast Asia.

The Asian financial crisis helped to provide this reason, triggering East Timor's path to independence. Only when the Indonesian economy collapsed and Suharto stepped down did the importance of the US-Indonesia economic and strategic relationship begin to deteriorate. However, following the 1997 financial crisis, and despite the September 1999 East Timor violence, the US moved its position on Indonesia only slightly—from tepid supporter to disinterested bystander. The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed human rights abuses throughout Southeast Asia on a scale that made the several hundred-thousand casualties in East Timor seem relatively low-scale in comparison. The US was unaffected by the East Timor outcome and unwilling to invest resources to influence it. For the East Timorese, the Asian financial crisis unlocked the *window of opportunity*, but significantly more effort was required to open it.

The combined weight of regional Southeast Asian countries and the UN was insufficient to influence Indonesian decision-making. In accord with international relations theory assessed in Chapter 2, if the hegemon disengages, the struggle becomes regional. When the US disengaged following the 1997 financial crisis, the struggle for East Timor became a Southeast Asian issue.

The UN, under Kofi Annan, led this effort on behalf of the region. Even with the backing of the UN and numerous regional countries, Annan failed to influence the situation satisfactorily. Withstanding a diplomatic storm was nothing new for the Indonesians. Historically, the intensity of international attention would quickly fade. Sovereignty was Habibie's trump card—the UN could do nothing without his invitation. Provided the US remained indifferent Habibie could absorb international pressure indefinitely.

The bottom line is that given the geopolitical context of the times, East Timor could not have achieved independence without US support. On numerous occasions the US communicated that East Timor was not in the US national interest. According to PDD25, the Clinton Administration would only support UN peacekeeping missions “when UN involvement represents the best means to advance US interests.”<sup>112</sup> This was reinforced well into the 1999 crisis. Two weeks after the autonomy vote, in the midst of widespread violence being inflicted on the East Timorese, the US remained unwilling to act. It needed a reason to believe East Timor was in the US national interest, and the UN was not providing it.

Alliances are always capricious; occasionally they are effective. The US-Australia alliance is among the strongest of bilateral global alliances. Rarely, if ever, does either partner request assistance before it is offered. In Canberra in 2011, President Barack Obama summarized the relationship between Australians and Americans:

The bonds between us run deep. In each other's story we see so much of ourselves. Ancestors who crossed vast oceans—some by choice, some in chains . . . we are citizens who live by a common creed—no matter who you are, no matter what you look like, everyone deserves a fair chance; everyone deserves a fair go . . . from the trenches of the First World War to the mountains of Afghanistan . . . Aussies and Americans have stood together, we have fought together, we have given lives together in every single major conflict of the past hundred years. Every single one.<sup>113</sup>

When Australia repeatedly asked the US for assistance in 1999, the rare and passionate nature of the appeal altered US national inclinations. Always strong allies, the US-Australia relationship shone amidst the Asian financial carnage. Australia's economy emerged largely unaffected. If a nation's power is measured in part by the potential of its economy, then the financial crisis served to increase Australia's relative power in Southeast Asia. Howard sought to capitalize on this momentum to assist solving the East Timor crisis.

The key moment for East Timor was Howard's meeting with Clinton at the APEC meeting. Prior to this encounter, the US was reluctant to engage for two reasons: it was unwilling to commit troops to any mission that was not in

the US national interest, and it believed US pressure on Indonesia was unnecessary. Howard possessed the diplomatic capital to trump these beliefs. As described in Chapter 2, to alter US policy Howard had to address three criteria before Clinton could be influenced. Howard needed: 1) capacity to realign established great power policy with small power self-interest, 2) a viable solution or plans to effectively pursue this interest, and 3) the capacity to execute combat missions in support of those solutions.

Howard realigned established great-power policy with small-power self-interest. Only when the Australian government expressed official concern about conditions in East Timor did Washington find time to consider the problem.<sup>114</sup> Clinton's visit to APEC enabled Howard to eyeball the President and request his help. Of particular note, during the Howard-Clinton discussions, the President acknowledged the US would have to do something, *not* for East Timor, *but* for Australia.<sup>115</sup> To Clinton, the consequences of not acting became greater than acting. The change in US national interest was barely perceptible—but it was enough.

Second, Howard presented a viable solution to pursue East Timor's independence. Nine months earlier, Australia had been working on options for East Timor's autonomy.<sup>116</sup> On 6 September, when the UN inquired whether Australia could contribute to an international peace keeping force, Howard replied that Australia could lead the mission.<sup>117</sup> Further, Australia planned to circumvent UN funding problems that were concerning potential regional contributors. Australia agreed to reimburse regional participants' costs before UN funds were approved. The use of Australian funds played an important role in the mindset of contributing nations by increasing their willingness to participate, and reduced the need for a US troop commitment.<sup>118</sup>

Finally, Australia had the capacity to execute combat missions in support of the proposed solution. The US would not be left to clean up the mess. By mid-September 1999, a poll revealed that approximately 90 percent of Australians favored an intervention in East Timor.<sup>119</sup> This support, combined with a modern, well-equipped military; strong backing in the media; and bipartisan parliamentary support, combined to instill US confidence that Australia would get the job done.<sup>120</sup> Howard adequately fulfilled all three criteria, leaving the US President with little to do—other than make a phone call.

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## Chapter 6

### Conclusions

Analyzing two-and-a-half decades of international decision making reveals the complex machinations behind policy creation at the international level. The Indonesians were brutal opportunists, but their opportunism in East Timor was hardly unique. It represented a long-standing historical norm rather than a rare human tragedy. Some 2,500 years ago, a member of the Athenian delegation famously wrote, "The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must."<sup>1</sup> East Timorese independence might prove an exception to the rule; their suffering at the hands of a strong neighbor appears to have ended in 1999. And yet, even this small exception is debatable. From another perspective, the Indonesians were the weak party, eventually *suffering what they must* at the inclinations of the United States.

In all cases, what matters in international relations is the power of the regional hegemon. The East Timor crisis revealed the unremarkable lack of power in subhegemonic states and collective intuitions. The United Nations did not fail to act; rather, much like the Portuguese with whom it shared concern for the East Timorese, it was simply powerless to stop the Indonesian sovereign state. The continuing reality is that the state is the highest power in the international system. Likewise Australia, East Timor's closest non-Indonesian neighbor, lacked the capacity to intervene until Indonesia lost its strategic relevance. Depending on one's point of view, Australia's performance was either slow-motion hypocrisy or a steady pursuit of the national interest. I favor the latter. Consistent with the performance of most liberal democracies, Australia placated the domestic audience by espousing liberal collectivism while constructing a foreign policy based on pragmatic realism.

The 1975 invasion of East Timor revealed the enormous global influence of a bipolar hegemonic struggle between the Soviets and the Americans. Gross abuses of human rights in Southeast Asia were a low priority within the context of the Cold War. Millions were simultaneously perishing in the killing fields of Cambodia alone, and far more popular political causes were proliferating throughout the world. The plight of East Timor was lost in a sea of tragedies. The United Nations passed strongly worded resolutions, but without the support of the Soviets or the United States, the United Nations was predictably ineffective. It mattered little that the United States abstained instead of vetoing the UN resolutions. In the UN environment, instances of the Security Council *veto* garner attention; however, when a great power abstains there is

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often a *veto* effect. The events of 1975 highlighted the diplomatic power of the *abstention*. With it, the United States sent a message to the Southeast Asian region it dominated. First, the United States did not object to Indonesia's treatment of East Timor. Second, the United States implicitly disagreed with any state voting against Suharto. Third, the United States would not be providing troops to a UN peacekeeping mission in East Timor. In such a case, the abstention achieved the effect of a veto without attracting the attention of one. Hedley Bull, in *The Anarchical Society*, was correct: institutions follow a pattern of behavior sustaining the primary goals of the biggest players.<sup>2</sup>

The Cold War period of this analysis (1976–89) revealed the enduring impact of a bipolar struggle. Despite reports emerging in 1979 that the East Timor death toll was in the hundreds of thousands, no government was willing to provide security forces to stop the carnage.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the Cold War, Australia lacked the capacity to influence the East Timor outcome. More specifically, it lacked the ability to realign great-power policy with small-power national interest. The period simply revealed that critics of Australian policy routinely overstated Australia's capacity to influence international decision making. The various Australian governments knew otherwise. They possessed intelligent and pragmatic international policy makers who were wise to choose security and cooperation over futile condemnation of their Indonesian neighbor.

The post–Cold War period revealed the power and prestige of the unipolar hegemon. Indonesia's decline in US strategic importance was compensated for by its increasing economic potential. By the mid-1990s, the Indonesian economy was growing at seven percent per annum, and the United States capitalized on the opportunity. Australia took advantage of the situation, too. The strategic capstone was Prime Minister Keating acquiring Indonesia's first-ever bilateral security agreement: the 1995 Agreement to Maintain Security (AMS).<sup>4</sup> The economic capstone was the lucrative Timor Gap Oil and Gas Treaty, covering what became, for a short period in the 1970s, part of the East Timor exclusive economic zone. Compared to these achievements, East Timorese human rights concerns were a trivial issue.

The post–Cold War period revealed little would change for global human rights. Overall, the international community had made little progress in stopping genocide. The UN leaders pledged to make the post–Cold War decade one of change in the observance of international human rights.<sup>5</sup> It was a noble cause, to be sure, but East Timor endured throughout the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union with little change in its plight. Intervention in East Timor, when it finally came, was trumpeted as a shining example of international protection of human rights—a belated but welcome achievement.

But it is difficult to counter the arguments that support for the UN mission was consistent with Waltzian realism: "No policy is advanced with the plea that, although this will hurt my country, it will help others."<sup>6</sup> Australia, like all states, is primarily concerned with security and economic prosperity; human rights are a distant third. Abundant evidence supports this conclusion: approximately one million Ibos were killed in Nigeria in the 1960s; 800,000 communists were killed at the hands of Suharto in Indonesia and two million Cambodians under the ruthless Pol Pot in the 1970s; 800,000 Rwandans were slaughtered in the 1990s; and 300,000 have died so far in Sudan. All these events are listed among the world's "worst genocides." Even so, governments do not intervene until their national interest is threatened.<sup>7</sup> For 25 years, no one came to the rescue of the East Timorese.

During the 1975 invasion and subsequent Cold War period, no state or external organization was prepared to take on the TNI for the sake of lives in East Timor.<sup>8</sup> The end of the Cold War may have changed the regional dynamics, yet East Timor remained a small nation at the whim of powerful international relations. In a world in which acquiring power is the primary driver of state behavior, it is unsurprising that the end of the Cold War changed little in the UN quest to observe human rights. Eight years after the Soviet collapse, it was the 1997 Asian financial crisis that triggered an even greater shift in Southeast Asia's balance of power, providing a US-backed Australia with a golden opportunity to influence the direction of the region. While a pleasing outcome for those advocating the enforcement of human rights, there should be no confusion regarding Australia's motives for intervening in East Timor. Australia, like all states, pursues its own self-interest—relentlessly seeking opportunities to increase power relative to others.

In 1999, the United Nations provided a conduit for Australia to impose its will on the Indonesian government, improve Australia's reputation for respecting international law, demonstrate an ability to lead UN operations, and gain a new alliance in the middle of the Indonesian archipelago. Australian support for military intervention in East Timor took 25 years to develop because it reflected Ambassador Woolcott's pragmatic realism. Prior to 1999, Australia lacked the capacity to influence the East Timor crisis, instead pursuing improved strategic and economic relationships with Indonesia. The 1997 financial crisis provided an opportunity for Australia to improve its relative strategic position. Prime Minister Howard campaigned heavily to gain the support of the United States, for he, like all state leaders, understood that when a window of national opportunity opens, it befits a statesman to pass through it. When Richard Leaver argued, "Howard's about-face was . . . public testament to a massive failure of past Australian policy,"<sup>9</sup> his assertion could

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not have been further from the truth. Australia has always been consistent, adjusting its foreign policy to take advantage of shifting international relations in pursuit of one thing—the Australian national interest.

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