US pushes for military involvement in East Timor

Mike Head
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The Clinton administration in Washington is pushing for a substantial military involvement—including US Marines—in East Timor. The force would be deployed before or after the people of the half island vote in an August 30 UN-run ballot on secession from Indonesia. According to two media reports, the US proposals have led to tensions with the Howard government in Australia.

The Melbourne *Sunday Age* last weekend cited "defence and diplomatic sources" saying that the US had asked Australia to lead a force that included Marines. The Howard government had rejected the plan, the newspaper said, preferring instead to work more closely with the Indonesian military. In the meantime, Canberra is preparing an Australian-led military force drawn from Asian countries to move into Timor in the event that the vote goes against Indonesia.

The newspaper's sources let it be known that the Australian government had ordered senior Australian defence officials to reject an invitation to discuss strategy and intelligence planning for East Timor at US Pacific military headquarters in Honolulu. American officials were told that any discussion of a UN force involving the Marine Corps was "premature" and could be "damaging" to relations between Australia and Indonesia.

This message was also reportedly conveyed by the head of the Australian Foreign Affairs and Trade Department, Dr Ashton Calvert, during a recent meeting in the United States with the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Stanley Roth. Roth apparently urged an early intervention and indicated that, despite public perceptions to the contrary, the US wished to play a central role in "peace making" in East Timor.

Calvert disagreed with the notion, in line with military plans under preparation in Australia. "Military strategists" told the *Age* that Australia's contingency planning foresaw perhaps 2,000 Australian and New Zealand military personnel forming the nucleus of a considerably larger force, with the bulk of the ground troops coming from Pacific and Asian countries, such as Fiji, Malaysia and Thailand.

The official argument for this proposal is that the Indonesian military would be more likely to accept such "culturally akin" troops, rather than Western soldiers. In reality, the purpose is to ensure that Australian military, strategic and commercial interests prevail in Timor in the wake of the military involvement, not American. The plan would also sideline Portugal, the former colonial power in East Timor, which would resume formal sovereignty under a UN administration if Indonesia withdraws.

Another report of the US-Australian dispute appeared in the *Australian Financial Review* last Saturday. Its author, Brian Toohey, who has long advocated Australian military engagement in East Timor, argued that the upshot of the dispute was that the US is considering committing a relatively large contingent of Marines to a UN force, while the Howard government is more concerned not to offend the Indonesian military.

Two days after these reports appeared, an agency headed by former US president Jimmy Carter accused the Indonesian military and the government of President B.J. Habibie of supporting the anti-independence militias that are killing, harassing and intimidating people in the lead-up to the vote. "The Carter Center is particularly concerned by clear evidence ... of Indonesian military and government support of pro-integration groups," it said in a report. The Centre is observing the UN-organised ballot, which it said was affected by a "general climate of fear and intimidation". Such a report could provide a pretext for US intervention.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer last Sunday denied that a rift had developed between Australia and the US, saying the nations were working "as one" to ensure calm in East Timor before and after the ballot. Interviewed on television, he said Australia would be

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involved in any UN force, but only after the Indonesian parliament ratified the UN ballot, which is expected to reject an Indonesian autonomy scheme. He said he had discussed East Timor with US Secretary of State Madeline Albright in Singapore.

Downer was criticised by his Labor Party opposition counterpart, Laurie Brereton, who repeated his previous demands for earlier intervention by UN troops, led by Australia. While rejecting that position, the Howard government has prepared thousands of troops for use in East Timor. It recently completed moving 3,000 combat-ready troops to the northern Australian city of Darwin, just 600 kilometres from Dili, the East Timor capital. It has a similar number on alert in the north Queensland city of Townsville, about an hour's flight away.

On Thursday, Downer made known plans for Australian political and military figures to seek a leading role in doubling the size of the UN presence before the August 30 ballot, subject to Indonesia's agreement in talks scheduled at the UN in New York. Currently, the UN mission consists of about 400 election organisers, 280 police advisers and 60 military liaison officers, as well as 4,000 East Timorese who work as interpreters, drivers and clerical staff.

Downer last week became the first Australian foreign minister to visit Dili. While there, he outlined a shift in Australian policy—the second shift within seven months. He said the Howard government was abandoning its preference that the province remain part of Indonesia. Early this year Downer announced what was dubbed "an historic shift". He said that while Australia preferred East Timor to remain Indonesia's 27th province, it would support independence if the majority of East Timorese voted for it. Until then, Australia was one of the few countries in the world to recognise Indonesia's claim to the territory it invaded in 1975.

While in East Timor, Downer warned the Habibie regime that its international reputation was at stake over the handling of the ballot. His comment echoed earlier threats by Roth and also the World Bank that Indonesia would face problems in its relations with the US and other financial powers if it did not reign in the militias and allow the UN ballot to proceed.

Under an agreement struck between Indonesia and Portugal, the UN is planning a four-year interim administration over East Timor in the event of a pro-independence vote. The wholly-appointed body, likely to include representatives from Portugal, as well as both pro-independence and pro-Indonesian groups, would take charge of the tiny statelet's economy and internal affairs. It would see intense jockeying between Portugal, the US, Australia and other capitalist powers for hegemony over East Timor's oil and natural gas reserves, coffee plantations and other resources.

In an editorial on Wednesday, the *Australian Financial Review* demonstrated how Australian big business hopes to use the UN operation to its advantage. "With the threat of an Indonesian walkout after a pro-independence vote in August, it now seems better to have the MPR [the Indonesian parliament] allow East Timor to move under official UN control as fast as possible to prevent a destructive vacuum," it said. "And once the UN is clearly in charge there should no longer be any impediments to countries like Australia providing the necessary assistance to maintain peace and prevent future meddling by Indonesia."

It is only necessary to replace the obligatory diplomatic language of "maintain peace" with "make profitable investment" to provide a clear statement of the designs of the corporate executives for whom the *Financial Review* speaks. Similar considerations are motivating officials in Washington and Lisbon. Apart from the immediate natural wealth of East Timor, it provides a base for operations throughout the Indonesian archipelago, which is one of the most resource-rich and strategically-crucial regions of the world.

As for the leaders of the Timorese secessionist coalition, the National Council for Timorese Resistance (CNRT), they are actively urging Australia and other Western powers to intervene. One of its leaders, Leandro Isaac, met Downer in Dili and appealed for "Australia's help to stabilise the situation" after the ballot. On a recent trip to Australia, the CNRT's vice-president Jose Ramos Horta emphasised that an East Timorese government would ensure a favourable climate for international investors, even to the extent of setting up Swiss-style secret banking facilities.

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