

Australian imperialism and East Timor: The Prime Minister's Address to the Nation

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Delivering his “Address to the Nation” on national television on Sunday night, Australian Prime Minister John Howard opened a new chapter in the history of Australian imperialism.

In the past, stretching back to the Boer War and World War I, and continuing right through to the Gulf War in 1990-91, Australian military operations have always been conducted at the behest of, or in collaboration with, the great powers—first Britain and then the United States.

But on this occasion, boosted by a bellicose media campaign and the protest movements demanding “Australian troops in,” Howard launched a military campaign prepared, organised and led by the Australian government and its armed forces.

In the 19th century, British manufacturers would purchase stately homes, or even have them constructed, in order to invest themselves with an aura of tradition and history. In like manner, Howard invoked a mythical military tradition as he sought to elevate himself to statesmen-like heights in launching the largest ever military campaign initiated by Australia.

“Our soldiers,” he proclaimed, “go to East Timor as part of a great Australian military tradition, which has never sought to impose the will of this country on others, but only to defend what is right.”

The traditions Howard was actually following were those laid down by every 20th century capitalist politician announcing a foreign military intervention—the invocation of the ideals of freedom, democracy and morality in order to cover up the real, baser motives.

The record of the Australian military, steeped in the history of the racist White Australia policy, has been one of enforcing the dictates of the major powers and propping up military dictatorships and repressive regimes throughout the Asian region against the working class and peasant masses.

One need only recall the last major military action by Australian armed forces in the Vietnam War. The then Prime Minister Harold Holt proclaimed Australia was “all the way with LBJ”, as half a million US troops waged a brutal war against the Vietnamese people and the US airforce rained down destruction from the sky in line with the declared policy of bombing the country back to the Stone Age.

Prior to the Vietnam War, Australian troops had joined with British forces in so-called counter-insurgency operations during

the Malayan Emergency of the 1950s, aimed at ensuring the installation of an authoritarian, pro-imperialist regime after independence.

And before that, Australian forces had joined the US invasion of Korea, assisting in the imposition of a military dictatorship, as the US military sought to establish its hegemony in East Asia at the start of the Cold War.

Throughout the post-war period, the Australian military enjoyed the closest collaboration with the military regimes throughout South-East Asia. In no case were these ties more assiduously pursued than with the bloody Suharto regime, which came to power in 1965-66 through the mass murder of 500,000 to 1 million workers, peasants and Communist Party members.

Little wonder, then, that the Australian head of the so-called Interfet force, Major-General Peter Cosgrove enjoyed such cordial relations with his Indonesian counterparts when he visited the East Timor capital, Dili, on Sunday. He was no doubt renewing old acquaintances struck up during previous joint Indonesian-Australian military exercises.

Howard's myth-making was not confined to military history. It assumed truly breathtaking proportions when he invoked the suffering of the East Timorese people as the reason for the dispatch of Australian forces.

“We have all sensed,” he declared, “that a small, vulnerable community was about to be denied the freedom they have sought for so long, and voted so overwhelmingly to achieve.”

But one of the major obstacles encountered by the East Timorese people in their long struggle against oppression has been the support—economic, political and military—provided by successive Australian governments to the Indonesian military, ever since the invasion of East Timor in 1975.

This close collaboration continued throughout the period leading up to the August 30 referendum. The Australian government, despite warnings from its own intelligence sources and the public utterances of militia leaders that the territory would be turned into a “sea of fire” if there were a vote for independence, insisted that the Indonesian military remain in control.

If there is anger in Indonesian government and military circles at Australia's current actions, it is because they feel

betrayed by their closest ally—the only government in the world that had provided legal recognition to the forcible incorporation of East Timor as Indonesia's 27th province.

As for the United Nations, its officials told the Timorese people it would be safe to vote, even as they were receiving briefings from Australia warning that a massacre was being prepared.

The violence unleashed after the referendum result was declared on September 4 did not come as a surprise. It had been anticipated by the Howard government and formed part of its strategic planning—a fact acknowledged by the prime minister in the course of his address.

Declaring he was “proud that Australia was asked to lead the peacekeeping force”, he continued: “Months ago, we made ready an additional brigade of the Australian Army in case Australian forces were needed for peacekeeping operations in East Timor. As a result, we were able to respond immediately to the United Nation's request, not only to participate but also to lead the multinational force.”

In other words, knowing of the plans of the Indonesian military and the militias, the Australian government made ready to be first in on the action.

In the only reference to the real motivation for the East Timor operation—the largest Australian military mobilisation since World War 2—Howard acknowledged that it was “in our national interest to do so.”

Those interests centre on immediate economic considerations, in particular the oil reserves covered by the Timor Gap Treaty with Indonesia—reserves said to be worth anywhere between \$11 billion and \$19 billion and constituting the 23rd largest oilfield in the world.

Legal opinion has already been provided that, in the event of East Timor becoming independent, the treaty would have to be renegotiated. By controlling the military situation—an operation which, in Howard's words, could be “long and protracted”—the Australian government is working to ensure that an “independent” East Timor will function as a de facto Australian protectorate, with consequent economic benefits extracted according to the old maxim “to the victor go the spoils”.

Significantly, the East Timorese leader Xanana Gusmao is now in Darwin, working out plans for a transitional government—possibly to include sections of the militia—which, no doubt, will ensure that Australian economic interests are well protected.

Besides the immediate economic benefits, there are wider geopolitical considerations behind the Australian and UN intervention into East Timor.

In the aftermath of the end of the Cold War, former political alliances and arrangements have broken down. New arrangements have to be developed. All the major, as well as the minor, powers recognise that in order to stake their claims and assert their interests they must take part in the action. This is the reason for the ever-lengthening list of countries preparing

to send forces to the tiny half-island. Besides Australia, those committing military personnel include the US, France, Britain, Italy, Canada, New Zealand, Portugal, South Korea, the Philippines, Brazil, Thailand and Singapore with offers of “assistance” coming from China, Russia, Malaysia, Fiji, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Argentina.

The specific interests of Australian imperialism in this post-Cold War struggle for control of the vital resources of the region were spelt out in an editorial published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last Friday.

Pointing to the new political “consensus” on the deployment of Australian troops abroad, it insisted that this “rare” agreement be seized upon “to start building Australia's defence capability for the next century.”

“The crisis in East Timor, after all, is also a reminder that we live in an unpredictable, and potentially unstable, world. To the north, the complexion of Indonesia's post Suharto politics, together with the country's ability to deal peacefully with other separatist challenges, is uncertain. So, too, is Papua New Guinea's future without a lasting settlement in Bougainville and fundamental reform of PNG's political institutions. The China-Taiwan conflict may erupt into a shooting war. Beyond that is the simmering conflict on the Korean peninsula. To the west, rising tensions between Pakistan and India are particularly dangerous, even to their distant neighbours, because both possess nuclear weapons. Even to the south it is conceivable that, before long, Australia may become locked in a conflict over competing claims to the resources of the Antarctic continent.”

In conclusion, the editorial noted that building the kind of military capability needed for the future would be “much more expensive than Australians have become accustomed to” and that it was necessary to begin a “national debate” involving “discussion about trade-offs in areas such as tax cuts and welfare expenditure against increases in defence spending.”

Such a frank assessment, which is indicative of the wide-ranging strategical discussions now taking place in ruling circles, underscores the fact that the military intervention in East Timor has nothing to do with the defence of the rights of the East Timorese people. It is part of a wider agenda for the pursuit of the national interests of Australian imperialism abroad, coupled with deepening attacks on social conditions and living standards at home.



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