

# East Timor provokes Australian foreign policy crisis

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Less than a month after it began, Australia's military deployment into East Timor has provoked rising political tensions and a profound crisis in foreign policy. The intensifying pressures exploded last week in a public slanging match between current Australian Prime Minister John Howard and his immediate predecessor, the former Labor Prime Minister, Paul Keating.

Keating blamed Howard for "the worst foreign policy disaster since the Vietnam War". The massacres carried out by the Indonesian army-backed militia gangs against the East Timorese people were caused, Keating declared, by the failure of the Australian government's strategy.

"[John Howard] wanted to be the independence bringer to East Timor. All he has brought them is tears and grief."

An incensed Howard called a press conference to "totally reject" Keating's statement and to accuse him of "reckless indifference to the national interest", something not far short of treason.

While Keating's remarks were portrayed in the tabloid media as being part of a "personal" vendetta and "highly exaggerated", they echoed the sentiments of several political commentators, who have roundly condemned the Howard government for its handling of the East Timor crisis.

Under the headline, "A holocaust of Canberra's making", the *Australian's* Greg Sheridan wrote: "This has been a bloody and appalling failure of Australian strategy and policy." Paul Lyneham, a reporter for the Nine television network, asked: "By what God-given right did Australia, with all the intelligence at its fingertips, decide that proceeding with the ballot was worth the mass slaughter? Let's not forget that our troops are going into danger because of the greatest stuff-up ever in Australian foreign policy."

No-one should be under the illusion that the "stuff up" and "disaster" bemoaned by Keating and sections of the media concerns the fate of the East Timorese people. No editorials denounced Australia's foreign policy when the Indonesian junta annexed East Timor, with Australia's blessing, in 1975, or when 200,000 East Timorese were slaughtered in the late 70s and 80s. Neither did they demand a "review" when Indonesia's crack troops, trained by the Australian military, murdered hundreds of unarmed demonstrators in what became known as the "Dili massacre" in 1991.

The current recriminations are all the more significant because, since the Vietnam War, whichever of the two major parties—the Australian Labour Party or the Liberal Party—has held office, a remarkable degree of bipartisan unanimity has existed in relation to foreign policy. On those rare occasions when "peacekeeping" troops have been sent abroad—such as during the Gulf war and Cambodia—unswerving support has been forthcoming from media and politicians alike.

Now, with Australian forces engaged in the biggest military campaign in decades, bitter infighting has erupted. The reason is that despite all the efforts of Howard and his government, Australia's strategic alliance with Indonesia lies in tatters, with far-reaching economic, political and military consequences for the Australian bourgeoisie in the Asia Pacific region.

The Indonesian government has torn up the security treaty it signed with Keating in 1995 and threats have been made by Jakarta that it will assist Indonesian companies to look elsewhere for wheat, sugar, cotton and other primary goods.

On Sunday Australian and Indonesia troops exchanged fire on the border of West and East Timor. The Indonesian army (TNI) claimed that an Indonesian policeman was killed. Underscoring the souring relations between the two countries, Dr Amien Rais, newly-elected head of the Indonesian People's Consultative Assembly, stated: "Indonesia should be firm. If they [Australian-led "peacekeeping" forces] entered West Timor, we should wipe them out."

From the mid-60s, relations with Indonesia's military regime formed one of the pillars of Australia's foreign policy. Underpinning that policy was Australia's Cold War alliance with the United States, oriented to combatting struggles by the oppressed masses throughout the Asia-Pacific region against colonial rule and imperialism, shoring up and financing repressive dictatorships and defending US economic interests.

Under General Suharto's military dictatorship, Indonesia formed a crucial bulwark against social unrest, and, particularly in the 80s and 90s, became a conduit for Australia in its growing economic ties to the Asian region, especially Japan.

In the early 60s, the two countries had been in conflict over Indonesia's confrontation with Malaysia. In 1963 the Australian government purchased its first F111 fighter bombers in the event of a direct clash between Australia and Indonesia, then led by the nationalist Sukarno.

Suharto's bloody coup of 1965 proved to be the turning point. Orchestrated by the US and supported by Australia, it saw the murder of some one million Communist party members, workers and peasants by the military. As Keating was to later remark, the advent of Suharto's New Order regime was "the event of most positive strategic significance to Australia in the post-war years."

In an article reviewing Suharto's importance to Australia over three decades, the *Financial Review* declared that he was "not only a cheerful killer of communists but was also good for regional stability—he cancelled Sukarno's mad confrontation of Malaysia and concentrated on repression at home rather than aggression abroad."

The benefits to Australian capital were considerable. By last year Indonesia was Australia's 10th largest trading partner, importing \$2.7 billion annually of Australian goods. Three hundred Australian companies have premises there. Moreover, the Timor Gap Treaty of 1989, predicated upon Australia's recognition of Indonesia's annexation of the territory, provided Australia with access to the lucrative oil and gas deposits in the Timor Sea, the stretch of ocean straddling the 600 km between Australia and East Timor.

Most importantly, according to the *Financial Review*, "a sixth of all Australian trade—\$25.3 billion in the year to March 1997—passes through Indonesian straits on the way to and from our big North Asian trading partners of Japan, Korea and China."

In early 1998, in the wake of the Asian economic crisis, the IMF demanded that Indonesia agree to a package of “economic reforms” designed to dismantle government monopolies and open the economy to transnational investment, especially by US companies. Howard travelled to Washington to press Indonesia's case, opposing the stringent IMF measures, fearful they would lead to Suharto's downfall.

The general's ousting in May 1998, after weeks of mass demonstrations demanding democratic reform, was viewed as a catastrophe in Australian ruling circles.

With its “special relationship” threatened, and with Portugal and other European powers actively pressing for their own demands, particularly in relation to East Timor, the Australian government was forced onto the back foot.

Howard's letter to Habibie in December 1998—the current focus of much of the domestic criticism—was written in an attempt to shore up the alliance, in the face of what the letter referred to as the “fair degree of international support” (i.e. pressure from Portugal) that was emerging for East Timor's “independence”.

Howard wrote: “I want to emphasise that Australia's support for Indonesia's sovereignty is unchanged. It has been a longstanding Australian position that the interests of Australia, Indonesia and East Timor are best served by East Timor remaining part of Indonesia.”

The letter went on to suggest that Habibie agree, for tactical reasons, to a form of autonomy, while delaying a referendum for a decade or more.

Habibie was reportedly “infuriated” that Howard had backed away from Australia's former position of uncritical support for Indonesian control of the territory. With pressure mounting from Portugal, the European Union and the United Nations, he announced that Indonesia would bring on the referendum immediately.

From then on, the Australian government was caught on the horns of a dilemma. It tried to maintain the best of relations with the Indonesian regime and army, in the face of copious reports from its own intelligence that militia gangs, trained and organised by the TNI, were already committing atrocities. It sought to neutralise the UN's intervention by opposing UN peacekeepers and insisting that the TNI remain in full control. At the same time, it prepared its own armed forces, in the event of the anticipated militia rampage, so that Australia could be first in, staking its own claim, against that of Portugal, to East Timor's spoils.

When the extent of the carnage became known, Howard rushed to rally the support of its longtime—and more powerful—ally for a military intervention. But the US responded rather coolly, refusing to commit its own troops. After considerable arm-twisting and veiled threats about the future of the US-Australia alliance, President Clinton did, eventually, agree to an Australian-led force. He backed this up with verbal threats to Habibie that the Indonesian economy would be “crashed” if the force were not “invited” in.

With promises of participation from several other countries, and a mandate from the UN to lead the “peacekeepers”, Howard postured as a humanitarian. His sordid manoeuvres between Indonesia and the UN were presented to a public, outraged by the militia violence in East Timor, as a “humanitarian” response to the crisis.

The media's compliance was universal. But the truth of the matter was that the fate of the East Timorese people was not even a factor in Howard's calculations. A recent article by Robert Garran in Murdoch's *Australian*, written in the wake of the Keating-Howard controversy, made the point: “Make no mistake, however, about Howard's goals. His story has changed now, but his ultimate objective was the same as Keating's: to solidify relations with a vitally important neighbour.

“It is only now that his primary purpose has so manifestly failed that Howard has turned Australia's East Timor policy into a moral crusade.”

Howard went even further. Flushed with success and the leader of a country that was now, for the first time, in command of an international

military intervention, he decided to dignify his pragmatic, knee-jerk reactions with the status of a new foreign policy strategy.

In his now infamous interview in the September 28 edition of the *Bulletin* magazine, Howard advanced “The Howard Doctrine”, his vision of Australia acting as a regional “deputy” to the global US policeman, intervening aggressively in the region to assert its economic and strategic interests and to defend “moral values”. Australia, he opined, “has a particular responsibility to do things above and beyond in this part of the world.” Why? “Because of the special characteristics we have; because we occupy that special place—we are a European, Western civilisation with strong links with North America, but here we are in Asia.”

Within days, Howard faced denunciation throughout Asia and condemnation at home, forcing him to issue a public denial that he had ever advocated the “US deputy” concept.

“Even if he had said it, he would want to pull his head in very quickly. It's just the wrong message to be sending to Asia at the moment,” said Hugh Smith, foreign policy strategist at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

“He may have got carried away by delusions of grandeur because of the role in East Timor.”

The *Australian* editorialised that Howard's pronouncements were a “misjudgment” that “convey an image of Australia as arrogant and patronising; they reflect aspirations to regional leadership that are not shared by everyone else in the region; by antagonising regional leaders they harm the Australian interests Mr Howard professes to hold.”

Salim Said, an Indonesian political analyst said Howard reminded him of “a 19th century European standing on a beach and thinking he will have to watch out for the little brown uncivilised neighbours.” Hadi Soesastro, an Indonesian academic observed: “It's always the deputy who gets killed.”

Malaysian opposition leader, Lim Kit Siang, attacked Howard for having “done more than any previous Australian Prime Minister to damage Australia's relations with Asia since the ‘White Australia’ policy was abolished in the 1960s.”

The prime minister's own Liberal parliamentary colleagues, with whom he had failed to discuss his thoughts, expressed concerns over the interview and called for an urgent party-room review of foreign policy.

The public row between Howard and Keating, coupled with Howard's rapid and undignified backflip, expose the foreign policy dilemma confronting the Australian ruling class. Its old Cold war alliances, based on repulsing the “communist threat” in the Asian region, are rapidly disintegrating. Its “special relationship” with Indonesia, which, until a few months ago, was wholeheartedly supported, not only by Keating but by every section of the Australian political establishment, has collapsed. Moreover, it is being denounced throughout Asia as racist, while its leadership of the East Timor intervention is increasingly being viewed as nothing but an exercise in naked self-interest.

Pinpointing the growing disquiet within ruling circles over the direction of foreign policy, a rather astute editorial in the magazine the *Eye* commented: “As we enter a new century, Australia is like a small boat being tossed around in a huge sea. We're being buffeted by waves from all directions and the ocean is unforgiving. But that's not the problem. The problem is that we're sailing a boat that was designed decades ago for a completely different kind of journey. And, even worse, we're in a boat whose captain and crew are using old maps and sailing without a destination.”

“The crisis in East Timor has exposed Australia, more than at any time in its recent history, as a relatively powerless country in its own region. Worse, it has exposed Australia in the eyes of its south-east Asian neighbours as a small Western country that cannot act in its own interests without the explicit and public support of the US.

“...because we are not America, and cannot back up our political,

military and moral positions with force, we are left to hang out to dry.”



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