

The Western powers and East Timor—a history of manoeuvre and intrigue

Nick Beams
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Claims that the Australian-led United Nations military intervention in East Timor is motivated by “humanitarian” concerns are belied by the historical record. The tragedy befalling the East Timorese people is the outcome of intrigues and manoeuvres, stretching back over decades, by the very imperialist powers now proposing to “save” them. As much of this record is not well known, it is worthwhile reviewing it in some detail.

The Indonesian invasion of 1975 and the subsequent “pacification” program, which led to the loss of 200,000 East Timorese lives, was backed by the US administration in order to stabilise the repressive regimes in the region following the defeat in Vietnam.

Some sections of the Indonesian ruling elite were not opposed to an independent East Timor. They were favourably disposed to the assurances offered by Fretilin leader Jose Ramos-Horta that East Timor under Fretilin control would be friendly to Indonesia. But to the dominant sections of the Indonesian military, the prospect of an independent East Timor was anathema. They insisted that the “Communist” controlled Fretilin be crushed and East Timor incorporated into Indonesia, lest the establishment of an independent state spark a revival of struggles against the military or encourage the development of separatist movements in other parts of the archipelago.

This view was reinforced by Washington. During their visit to Jakarta on December 6, 1975—part of a tour of South-East Asia aimed at bolstering the US position following the defeat in Vietnam the previous May—President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger gave the go-ahead for the invasion, which was launched the following day. The content of the Kissinger-Ford discussions has never been revealed, but there is no doubt that the US made it clear that the invasion of East Timor had to go ahead.

According to the account of events provided to Australian journalist John Pilger by Philip Liechty, the CIA desk officer at the time: “[Ford and Kissinger] came and gave Suharto the green light. The invasion was delayed for two days so they could get the hell out. We were ordered to give the Indonesians everything they wanted, and US arms were shipped straight to East Timor without Congress knowing. I saw all the hard evidence; the place was a free fire zone ... and all because we didn't want some little country being neutral or leftist at the UN.”

Subsequent testimony before the US Congress revealed that 90 percent of the weapons used by the Indonesian military in the invasion had been supplied by the US.

In January 1976, a US State Department official told the *Australian* newspaper that “in terms of the bilateral relations between the US and Indonesia, we are more or less condoning the incursion into East Timor ... The United States wants to keep its relations with Indonesia close and friendly. We regard Indonesia as a friendly, non-aligned nation—a nation we do a lot of business with.”

The Australian Labor government shared the concerns of the United States about the need to retain regional “stability” in the wake of the Vietnam debacle. In meetings with Suharto in 1974 and 1975, Prime

Minister Gough Whitlam offered Australian support for the incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia.

Besides the wider geo-political concerns, the Australian government also had specific economic interests at stake. These centred on the discovery and exploitation of oil—an issue that was to assume crucial importance in the period following the quadrupling of world oil prices by the OPEC organisation in 1973-74.

In 1972 Australia had reached an agreement with Indonesia on undersea oil exploration. But there was a “gap” in the coverage because of Portugal's jurisdiction over East Timor. Negotiations had been initiated with Portugal in order to close the “Timor Gap” but these broke down in 1974.

By early 1975 it was clear that Indonesia was preparing to invade East Timor, an annexation plan having been adopted the previous October. In February, the Indonesian military carried out a simulated invasion of East Timor in Lampung, South Sumatra.

As preparations were being set in motion, the Australian government recognised that Indonesian incorporation of East Timor could provide important benefits. These were set out in a cable from the Australian Ambassador to Indonesia, Richard Woolcott to Canberra.

“We are all aware,” he wrote, “of the Australian Defence interest in the Portuguese Timor situation, but I wonder whether the Department has ascertained the interest of the Department of Minerals and Energy in the Timor situation. It would seem to me that this Department might well have an interest in closing the present gap in the agreed sea border and this could be much more readily negotiated with Indonesia than with Portugal or independent Portuguese Timor. I know I am recommending a pragmatic rather than a principled stand but that is what national interest and foreign policy is all about.”

In 1976, in accordance with this maxim, Whitlam's successor as Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, offered *de facto* recognition of Indonesia's seizure of East Timor, even as pro-independence forces controlled some 75 percent of the territory. In January 1978, Australia gave legal recognition to East Timor's incorporation as the 27th Indonesian province in order to meet Indonesian pre-conditions for negotiations on the Timor Gap treaty covering the exploitation of oil reserves.

The former colonial power Portugal, after withdrawing from the territory in 1975, acquiesced in the Indonesian takeover. But it kept its options in the region open through successive United Nations resolutions in the 1980s, which opposed the Indonesian takeover and recognised East Timor as a “non-self-governing territory,” with Portugal designated the “administrative power”.

Within the framework of the Cold War, in which Suharto's military regime was supported as a bastion against “Communism” and the Indonesian masses, these resolutions remained by and large a dead letter.

The Timor Gap Treaty was signed in December 1989, on board a Royal Australian Air Force VIP plane flying over the Timor Sea, by the foreign

ministers of Australia and Indonesia. But even as it was being signed, economic and political conditions had begun to change.

By the beginning of the 1990s, Portuguese interest in the region was revived by the discovery of oil reserves, then estimated to be worth between \$11 billion and \$19 billion. A member of the European Union since 1986, Portugal was now in a stronger position to pursue its objectives. In 1991 it staked its claim with the launching of proceedings against Australia in the World Court, charging that the Timor Gap Treaty was illegal, damaged the material interests of both Portugal and the people of East Timor, and abrogated the right of the East Timorese people to self-determination.

In a denunciation of Australia's role, Portugal declared: "It was its designs on East Timor's petroleum that carried more weight than all the rest ... only this greed can explain the *de jure* recognition of an annexation by force at the cost of over 100,000 lives."

Needless to say, Portugal's renewed interest in East Timor was motivated by precisely the same greed. Seeking to wrest the territory from Indonesian control, it championed the demand for East Timorese self-determination—after having denied it for more than 400 years of colonial rule.

In June 1995, the World Court ruled on the Portuguese application, declaring that it could not make a decision on the legality of the Indonesian annexation because Indonesia did not recognise its authority. Following the verdict, the then Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans proclaimed a victory, declaring that Australia would have access to Timor Sea oil without interference from Portugal.

However, in its judgement the court found that "Portugal's assertion, that the right of peoples to self-determination, as it had evolved from the Charter and United Nations practice, had an *erga omnes* [a right that can be asserted against any Power] character, was irreproachable" and that "the principle of self-determination was one of the essential principles of contemporary international law." Under this ruling East Timor remained a non-self-governing territory with its people having the right to self-determination.

With the revival of Portuguese appetites, Indonesia and Australia had a mutual interest in ensuring closer ties. Moreover, the oil reserves underneath the Timor Sea were not the only motivation. Australia valued Suharto's support as a counterweight to the efforts of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir to keep it out of East Asian affairs, as it sought access to the fast-growing markets to the north.

In November 1994, Foreign Minister Evans told a conference on Indonesia that human rights issues should not be allowed to dominate Australia's relationship with Indonesia. "It is clear that in the economic sphere, we already have a substantial foundation on which to build still further. Our commercial linkages are growing rapidly—two-way trade grew to \$A3 billion last year, almost treble that of five years ago." Australian companies were developing lucrative investments, particularly mining, in Indonesia (estimated at \$10 billion in the early 1990s) often in partnership with close associates of the Suharto regime.

The Labor government's efforts to strengthen its ties with Indonesia culminated in December 1995 with the signing of a defence treaty. Keeping parliament and the public in the dark during negotiations, and not even informing the US, Prime Minister Keating greeted the treaty by hailing the establishment of Suharto's "New Order" regime in 1965—an event which resulted in the deaths of between 500,000 and one million workers, peasants and Communist Party members—as "one of the most significant and beneficial events in Australia's strategic history" providing for "regional stability."

But, again, the international situation was changing. With the end of the Cold War, the US discovered that the Suharto regime no longer served its interests as it had in the past. In particular, the domination of the Indonesian economy by Suharto family interests and those most closely

associated with the military—the phenomenon of so-called "crony capitalism"—was increasingly becoming an obstacle to the activities of US corporations.

The Asian economic crisis of 1997 provided the opportunity to intervene. Directed by US Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictated a series of measures aimed at "opening up" the Indonesian economy. In essence, these measures sought to replace the domination of the Indonesian economy by Suharto and the military cliques and ensure its domination by the world market, as interpreted by the interests of US global corporations.

According to a former senior diplomat cited by the *Australian Financial Review*: "What brought us to this particular place was the US decision to go with the US Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin's decision to pull the plug on the Indonesians. The US decided that Indonesia was not as strategically important as it had been, that Suharto no longer needed to be supported, and that it was better to see political change in Indonesia. So when the Asian crisis hit, they designed the IMF's terms in such a way as to force him out."

With the Suharto regime weakened, the Portuguese government recognised new opportunities. In 1997 it began an intense campaign through the United Nations, in collaboration with the leadership of the East Timorese independence movements, to get the East Timor issue back on the agenda.

Reflecting Portuguese and European pressure, the UN appointed Jamsheed Marker as a special envoy for East Timor to organise talks between Indonesia and Portugal. In April 1998, with the Suharto regime looking increasingly shaky, the National Council for Timorese Resistance [CNRT] was formed at a congress in Portugal, bringing together the rival organisations—Fretilin and the UDT—with Xanana Gusmao given the title of "lider maximo" (supreme leader).

The Indonesian regime feared that UN resolutions, coupled with the World Court decision in 1995, could provide the basis for an "act of self-determination", possibly in the form of a plebiscite, to determine the future status of the territory. In June 1998, the Habibie regime, seeking to deflect these pressures, agreed to give East Timor a special status with extensive autonomy, and in September 1998 signed an agreement with Portugal to commence negotiations on the proposal. The two sides agreed to restore diplomatic relations, enabling Portuguese representatives to officially return to Indonesia.

The Portuguese moves sounded alarm bells in Canberra. Concerns grew within the Australian government that it would be excluded from a UN-brokered decision on the future of East Timor in which its main immediate rival for control of the oil resources would play the leading role. While Portuguese initiatives through the UN could be safely ignored in the 1980s, it was a different situation in the post-Cold War environment and with the ousting of its long-time ally, Suharto.

Accordingly, the Australian government decided to intervene. Prime Minister John Howard sent a letter to Indonesian President Habibie on December 23, 1998 proposing that Indonesia provide autonomy to East Timor, leading to a vote on independence some years in the future. The Howard initiative was aimed at heading off the Portuguese moves: on the one hand, by proposing an extended period of autonomy, possibly for as long as 10 years, while maintaining collaboration between Indonesia and Australia over East Timor on the other.

In his letter Howard noted that it had been a "long-standing Australian position that the interests of Australia, Indonesia and East Timor" had been "best served by East Timor remaining part of Indonesia." Accordingly, he proposed a settlement along the lines of the Matignon accords employed by the French in the colony of New Caledonia, which "enabled a compromise political solution to be implemented while deferring a referendum on the final status of New Caledonia for many years."

“The successful implementing of an autonomy package,” Howard wrote, “with a built-in review mechanism would allow time to convince the East Timorese of the benefits of autonomy within the Indonesian Republic.”

But for the Indonesian regime, the key component of Howard's letter was the stipulation that an act of self-determination would eventually occur. It feared that no matter how long the period of autonomy, the outcome of any vote would be to separate from Indonesia. Angered by this shift on the part of its strongest ally in the 25-year suppression of the East Timorese people, the Habibie regime rejected Howard's proposal. Habibie then sought to up the ante, declaring in January 1999 that if Indonesia's offer for special autonomy for East Timor were rejected, it would put a resolution to the Peoples Consultative Assembly permitting East Timor to secede.

Habibie's seeming turnaround represented an ultimatum: if the Western powers want to push for secession, then we will bring on the vote immediately, under conditions where the Indonesian military remains in control, ready to launch a “scorched earth” policy if the autonomy plan is rejected.

Following Habibie's announcement, Indonesia continued negotiations with Portugal through the United Nations, leading to the May 5 agreement. A “popular consultation” was to be undertaken to determine whether the East Timorese people would accept Indonesia's autonomy plan.

The Indonesian regime calculated that, with its military remaining in control, the outcome would be in favour of autonomy, whereupon, according to the terms of the agreement, “the Government of Portugal shall initiate within the United Nations the procedures necessary for the removal of East Timor from the list of Non-Self Governing Territories of the General Assembly and the deletion of the question of East Timor from the agendas of the Security Council and the General Assembly.” In other words, the Indonesian incorporation of East Timor would receive official UN sanction.

It is significant that the Timorese people were not a party to the agreement under which the referendum of August 30 was eventually organised. The UN determined the method of “popular consultation” through an arrangement struck between the Indonesian regime and Portugal.

All the participants were aware that, in the event that autonomy were rejected, the Indonesian military and its militia thugs would unleash an onslaught against the East Timorese people.

Asked in January 1999, whether a referendum would bring civil war, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer replied: “Well, if you had a plebiscite now I think that would be the result, that's the whole point. ... If you just thought the solution to the East Timor issue was to hold a referendum tomorrow, all I can say is it would cause more bloodshed than solutions.”

In March, Australian intelligence sources informed the government that the Indonesian military was organising the militias and a campaign of intimidation, while Downer publicly denied these facts. In July, the Dili commander of the Indonesian armed forces told the Australian *Sunday* television program: “I would like to convey the following: if the pro-independents do win [the referendum] ... all will be destroyed. And East Timor won't be as we see it now. It will be worse than 23 years ago.”

Despite these warnings, the United Nations, together with the Australian and Portuguese governments, pressed for the referendum to go ahead. For them, a defeat for the Indonesian autonomy proposal—and the unleashing of violence by the military and its thugs—would provide the political basis to intervene. As Howard has publicly acknowledged, the Australian government's decision, last March, to upgrade its military preparedness to the highest level since the Vietnam War was the key factor leading to the UN's “call” for Australia to head the “peacekeeping” operation.

The petty bourgeois nationalist leaders of the CNRT took their cue from the UN and the imperialist powers. After initially opposing a referendum, in the knowledge of what would be unleashed by the Indonesian military if it remained in charge, the CNRT fell in behind the UN plan. It would provide them, they concluded, with the best conditions to press for a military intervention that would install them in government.

The role played by the CNRT leaders, especially Xanana Gusmao, was critical. They opposed any action by the East Timorese people to defend themselves against the militia attacks.

After the May 5 agreement, Gusmao demanded that the youth in Dili, who wanted to organise against the militia thugs, take no action. Denouncing a proposed street demonstration as showing a lack of “political vision as well as a misperception of the current situation”, he declared in a CNRT statement of May 10: “I am aware that the youths are trying to mobilise the population of Dili for a massive demonstration. This only shows that these youths are deprived of any sense of responsibility...”

“I wish to remind everyone that the presence of the UN in East Timor does not mean that victory is on our side. The task of the UN is to organise the consultation of the people on August 8th [the initial date for the referendum]. We must all contribute to this process, follow the orientations of the UN team. To this end, I reiterate my appeal to all to remain calm. I reiterate my appeal to the youths of Dili to obey orders and demand that they act responsibly and with discipline. Without discipline, we will be weak, and as long as we do not demand discipline from ourselves, we are in no position to demand it of others. We must always bear this in mind.”

Even as the onslaught began, following the declaration of the referendum result on September 4, a CNRT statement insisted that the guerrilla forces of Falintil take “no action that could be construed as starting a civil war.”

Gusmao and the CNRT were concerned that any resistance would be construed by the western media as civil war, leading the major powers to decide against intervention. Having seen the operation of the “CNN factor” in the war against Serbia, they calculated that the more massacres the better. The best conditions would thereby be created for mobilising “public opinion” in the west, demanding the sending of troops.

The tragic circumstances in which the people of East Timor now find themselves is the outcome of the combined actions of the imperialist powers—Australia, the US and Portugal among others—as well as the United Nations and the CNRT leadership.

The “solution” they now propose—the establishment of a UN military protectorate—will only bring a continuation of the disasters of the past in another form. Not until an independent program is developed, based on the unified struggle of the working class of the region and internationally, can the vicious circle of imperialist domination be broken.



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