East Timor and Australia's oily politics

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Among the most revealing aspects of recent events in East Timor has been the almost complete silence in Australian media and political circles about the two agreements signed by the Australian government last month to secure control over the multi-billion dollar oil and natural gas reserves beneath the Timor Sea.

One had to scour the newspapers for the barest references to the two treaties, tucked away in other stories. No headlines, photographs or commentary greeted either signing ceremony. In the first, on February 10, the Australian representative in Timor and UN Transitional Administration for East Timor (UNTAET) chief Sergio Viera de Mello initialled a new Timor Gap Treaty to replace the one that the Hawke Labor government signed with the Suharto regime in 1989. Under the new treaty, the UN has simply supplanted Indonesia as Australia's partner in the Timor Sea Zone of Cooperation.

For the second ceremony on February 29, de Mello was joined by Australian Resources Minister Nick Minchin to sign the so-called Perth Agreement. It clears the way for a $1.4 billion project in the Bayu-Undan field, which is about 500 kilometres north-west of Darwin, capital of Australia's Northern Territory, and 250 km south of Suai in East Timor. Led by the US oil company, Phillips Petroleum, a US-Australian-Japanese-British consortium now has permission to exploit the huge field, which is expected to yield up to 400 million barrels of liquefied petroleum gas. The royalties and taxation revenues will be split between Australia and UNTAET.

The scant mention of the treaties was in stark contrast to 1989 when members of Hawke's cabinet signed the Timor Gap Treaty with their Indonesian counterparts in a champagne ceremony on board a VIP jet flying above the Timor Sea. That event was celebrated with film footage, editorials and front-page headlines.

Why the reticence about the Howard government's successful efforts to secure a dominant stake in the Timor Gap? Because the scramble for oil and gas undermines the government's claims to have sent thousands of troops to East Timor last September for purely humanitarian purposes. It suggests that, in relation to Timor, the old adage applies: the more things change, the more they stay the same. Much has altered since 1989, but one thing has not—the central pillar of Australian policy has remained the siphoning off of the lion's share of the resources under the sea between Timor and Australia.

Officially, Australian policy has shifted from being the West's most ardent defender of the Indonesian regime and its annexation of East Timor, to championing the right of the Timorese people to self-determination. Yet even the form of the Timor treaties highlights the colonial character of the new arrangements. The signatory for East Timor was the UN Administrator, who currently holds complete power over the former Portuguese colony. The treaties will legally bind any incoming East Timorese government. As for the Timorese masses, in whose name Australia has intervened, they have had no say in the arrangements whatsoever.

All in all, the Timor operation has provided an object lesson in the *modus operandi* of the new “ethical” foreign policy proclaimed by the Western powers as the basis for their interventions into Yugoslavia and Timor last year. Under the pretext of a sudden concern for the lives and well-being of refugees and the oppressed, a new colonialism has emerged, driven entirely by corporate and government appetites for oil and gas revenues, as well as other natural resources, cheap labour, new markets and strategic advantages.

While silence greeted the treaty signings, considerable fanfare was afforded to another event. On February 23, the Australian-led International Force in East Timor (Interfet) officially lowered its flag in Dili, the East Timorese capital, and formally transferred power to UN troops. Speaking at the farewell ceremony, the Australian commander, Major-General Peter Cosgrove, declared that after 157 days Interfet had accomplished its mission. “Peace and security” had largely been restored, he said. Moreover, Interfet had proven that “not all armies are oppressive instruments of an unwelcome administration”.

There was more than a coincidence of timing, however,

between Interfet's departure and the signing of the two Timor Gap documents. When Cosgrove and 4,000 Australian military personnel were sent to East Timor last September their real mission was to protect Australian corporate and strategic interests. That was the mission that was largely completed with the Perth Agreement.

In fact, the operation was a continuation of three decades in which Australia's grip over the Timor Gap has been achieved over the bodies of hundreds of thousands of Timorese people. In the first place, in 1965-66 the Australian political, military and intelligence establishment gave full support to General Suharto's bloody coup in Indonesia and backed his dictatorship as a bulwark against the socialist and national liberation struggles in South-East Asia.

Then in 1974-75 the Labor government of Gough Whitlam gave Suharto unmistakable signals—and Whitlam's personal assurances at two summits—that his junta could invade East Timor with impunity. At least 200,000 Timorese people died as a result, through massacres and hunger. Timor's oil, first explored in the late 1960s, became a critical factor. Whitlam's ambassador to Indonesia, Richard Woolcott summed up Canberra's attitude in a diplomatic cable, advising the Labor government that a Timor Gap Treaty "could be more readily negotiated with Indonesia than with Portugal or independent Portuguese Timor".

These aspirations came to fruition in the 1989 treaty. In return for Indonesia's signature, Australia became the only Western country to extend formal or *de jure* recognition to East Timor's incorporation as Indonesia's 27th province. Just two years later, while feeling obliged to express regret at the loss of life, the Hawke government endorsed the Suharto regime's blatant cover-up of the 1991 Dili massacre, in which more than 200 unarmed protestors were gunned down by Indonesian troops.

Brought to office in 1996, the Howard government maintained the alliance with the Indonesian regime as long as it possibly could. Throughout most of 1999 it steadfastly defended the Indonesian military's claims that it would ensure the safety of the Timorese people in the lead-up to the autonomy ballot of August 30. After the ballot produced an overwhelming vote for secession, Howard's government quickly reversed its position and campaigned for an Australian-led multinational force to occupy the territory. Cynically, Howard argued that the bloodbath in East Timor had reached such proportions that Australia had to immediately intervene.

Leaked intelligence documents have proven that Australian security forces had reliable reports from aid workers, telecommunications surveillance and other sources as early as November 1998 that the Indonesian generals were arming and backing the militias who were slaughtering whole villages. Howard and his ministers insisted publicly that any military involvement was the work of "rogue elements" outside the control of president Habibie and armed forces commander General Wiranto.

As a direct result of this complicity, the military-organised rampage continued, reaching a climax in the days after the ballot. Towns were devastated, 400,000 people—half the population—were forced to flee their homes, and thousands were killed. Most of the damage was done before the Australian troops arrived. They largely policed an already destroyed country.

This is the true record of official Australian policy in East Timor. At every turning point—from 1974-75 to 1989 and 1999-2000—the guiding principle has been oil and strategic interests. With the breakup of the Suharto regime in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, an adjustment ultimately had to be made but the shift had no more to do with humanitarian concern than the previous policy.

General Cosgrove was not alone in claiming that his army had a uniquely humane role. His farewell speech echoed the sentiments of the entire political establishment—the Liberals, Nationals, Labor Party, Democrats and Greens—who all supported the intervention.

Even more significantly, it paralleled the claim of the "left" and radical milieu that demanded military intervention. As media commentators noted at the time, "troops out" activists of the Vietnam War era became champions of "troops in". Their support for the dispatch of the Australian military helped to dampen disquiet and cut off avenues for the expression of any opposition. Along with the Howard government and the other parties, they bear equal responsibility for the outcome.