

Gunboat diplomacy: Australian warships deploy to East Timor

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Just weeks after deploying troops to the Solomon Islands, the Howard government announced last Friday it was sending warships toward East Timor, without even the pretence of agreement by the Dili government. This gunboat diplomacy is another attempt by Canberra to use military force to assert Australian dominance over small neighbouring states and the resources of the Asia-Pacific region.

The guided-missile frigate, HMAS Adelaide, and three troop carriers, the HMAS Kanimbla, Tobruk and Manoora, are offshore or moving toward the northern Australian city of Darwin, which is located just 650 kilometres from the East Timorese coast. A force of up to 1,000 troops, with armoured vehicles and other heavy equipment, is on standby in Townsville and Darwin to embark on the vessels. According to Australian government sources, the force will be ready to deploy into Dili by the end of week. Advance units of infantry could deploy within a matter of hours by air.

The past several months have seen East Timor rocked by a rebellion inside the armed forces, anti-government demonstrations and riots in the capital Dili. The primary factor driving the discontent is poverty, combined with resentment toward a government which is viewed as nepotistic and compliant to Australia.

Seven years after the end of Indonesian rule and the start of an Australian-led UN mission that promised to “reconstruct” the country, the vast majority of East Timorese live on less than \$1 a day and have no adequate housing, clean water, education, medical services or employment. Australian energy companies and the Australian government, however, continue to make hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue and royalties from oil and gas fields beneath the Timor Sea that, under international law, should belong to East Timor.

In late April, after a week of demonstrations by rebel soldiers, security forces loyal to the government of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri opened fire on a demonstration of as many as 5,000 rebels and unemployed youth. At least six

protestors were shot dead and dozens of others were wounded or arrested. The violence led more members of the security forces to join with the rebels and further clashes between youth and police last week.

The political crisis has steadily escalated to the point where the armed rebels in the hills surrounding Dili are demanding that President Xanana Gusmao dismiss Alkatiri or face civil war. As many as 20,000 people have fled the capital, fearing bloodshed in the streets. Opposition parties and even factions of the ruling Fretilin party have joined the call for Alkatiri to go. Alkatiri has responded by labelling the protests and the military rebellion as “an attempt at a constitutional coup d’etat”.

The crisis could come to a head tomorrow. Fretilin will convene for a three-day annual congress and the country’s ambassador to the UN, Jose Luis Guterres, has announced that he intends to unseat Alkatiri as secretary-general and force him to resign as prime minister. If Alkatiri manages to hold on to his position, riots and armed clashes are possible. An unnamed diplomatic source told the *Australian* on May 13 that the vote for party leader “will take place while hundreds of armed soldiers and police beyond the control of the government are watching with considerable interest, less than an hour’s drive away from Dili”.

Regardless of whether Alkatiri or Guterres heads it, the government is under enormous diplomatic pressure to sanction the return of Australian troops, despite the specific statements last week that Dili did not want Australian military assistance. Timorese foreign minister Jose Ramos-Horta declared that he was not informed of the Australian naval movements and there was no need for international peace-keeping troops because “there is no war in East Timor”.

One factor in the factional infighting in Dili is competing economic and strategic interests of larger powers—Australia and Portugal in particular. Alkatiri announced on May 9 that he was seeking an agreement from Portugal—which ruled Timor as a colony until the Indonesian invasion in 1975—to send 100 Portuguese paramilitary police, the GNR, to help

with security. In a clear reference to the speculation that Australian troops would be sent if Dili asked, Alkatiri told Portuguese Radio Renascenca that “there have been contacts with the Portuguese authorities because the preference of the Timorese government is the GNR”.

The Portuguese government has formed a “crisis cabinet” group to monitor developments in Timor and developed “contingency plans” to evacuate Portuguese nationals. Such “contingency plans” have been used on numerous occasions by former colonial powers as the pretext for interventions into their previous possessions.

The UN Security Council voted on May 12 to extend the UN mission in East Timor, which was due to expire on May 20, for another month, pending a report by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. Before the vote, East Timor asked the UN to keep an international police contingent in place for another year, until scheduled elections next May. Portugal supported this request but Australia and the United States, backed by New Zealand, argued that any UN presence should be only complementary to bilateral and multilateral involvement. This dispute remains unresolved.

The clear intention in Canberra is to ensure that any UN force in East Timor will be made up of Australian troops—not Portuguese. Prime Minister Howard arrogantly dismissed Horta’s complaint that he had not been told of the Australian deployment. At a press conference in Washington following a lunch with US Vice President Dick Cheney, he declared that “we wouldn’t normally tell other countries what we’re doing with our military assets anymore than they would tell us what they’re doing with theirs”. While issuing the platitudes that Australia respected “East Timor is an independent country” and that troops would only deploy if Dili “asked”, Howard declared that his government had “put ourselves in a position to respond if that request does come”.

Definite parallels exist with the situation in 1999. Before and after the UN-supervised referendum that endorsed East Timor separating from Indonesia, Indonesian-aligned militias launched widespread attacks on independence supporters. After the vote, the violence was used to justify the deployment of a UN peace-keeping force. Australia, which since 1975 had endorsed Indonesia’s rule of the half-island, mobilised 5,000 troops and insisted on control over the operation. The deployment—the largest by the Australian military since the Vietnam War—was in large part to preempt the efforts by Portugal, whose energy companies had ambitions over its potentially resource-rich former colony, to lead the UN mission.

Australia’s motives were portrayed by the Howard government, the Labor Party, the Greens and various protest organisations as “humanitarian”. They were, however, no less predatory than Portugal’s. The primary concern was to

ensure that any future East Timorese government was subordinate to Canberra. In exchange for Australian support for Indonesian rule over Timor, the Suharto dictatorship had given Australia rights to explore large oil and gas fields that lay inside what would be the territorial waters of an independent East Timor. After protracted negotiations between 2002 and 2005, the Howard government successfully bullied the ostensibly sovereign East Timorese government into agreeing to defer any renegotiation of the maritime border for 50 years.

The crucial factor in Australia taking control of the 1999 UN mission was the backing of the United States. In a *quid pro quo* for Washington’s support, Howard infamously declared Australia would operate as the “deputy sheriff” for the US in the Asia-Pacific region. Under UN rule, US-aligned organisations like the International Monetary Fund played key roles in shaping the East Timor state apparatus and determining its economic and social policies, undermining Portuguese attempts to reestablish itself in its former colony.

The latest Australian deployment is also taking place with open US backing. The Howard government has given naked support to the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and functions as one of its most shameless international defenders. In return, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice rang Foreign Minister Alexander Downer last week to reassure him that the US was “right behind” whatever action Canberra decided to take in East Timor. Howard discussed the operation yesterday with Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Pentagon officials.

The dispatch of warships has also received the full endorsement of the Labor opposition. Labor leader Kim Beazley told Macquarie Radio on May 12: “This is precautionary. I think it’s sensible. This is our area, it’s our back door and it’s a difficult back door. It’s not getting any easier. It’s another good reason for not bogging ourselves down in Iraq.”

Beazley’s statement reflects what was apparent in 1999. Whatever their attitude toward the dispatch of troops to far-flung operations in countries like Iraq, every faction of the political establishment has consistently supported the use of military force to maintain Australian dominance in what it considers its regional “backyard”.



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