

Australian foreign minister unveils plans for the colonial occupation of East Timor

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Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer visited East Timor last weekend and laid out the broad outlines of Canberra's plans to establish a long-term colonial-style occupation of the country. Downer arrived in Dili on Saturday amid continuing looting and violence by rival street gangs, despite the presence of an Australian-led force of more than 2,000 troops and police.

It is now clear that Canberra's military intervention was aimed, not at ending the disorder in Dili, much less at assisting the estimated 100,000 displaced persons living in squalid camps. Rather its purpose has been to enable the Howard government to dictate terms to East Timor's leaders and preempt Australia's Asian and European rivals, most notably the former colonial power, Portugal.

The continuing chaos in Dili is serving as a useful political lever to achieve these ends. While Downer was in Dili, Australian Justice Minister Chris Ellison was at the UN in New York pressing for agreement with an ongoing Australian-led operation, along the lines of Canberra's takeover of the Solomon Islands in 2003. Under the guise of assisting a "failed state", Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomons Islands (RAMSI) controls all the main levers of executive power—finance, the police, courts and prisons—in the country.

Monday's *Sydney Morning Herald* provided details of Downer's three key proposals for a new UN mandate in East Timor. He argued firstly for "a large police force, comprising officers from a broad group of countries, preferably under an Australian commander."

"Second, it [Canberra] wants a more capable UN role in helping the East Timorese with governance and administration. East Timor has a budget surplus yet scant investment in vital infrastructure, shoddy systems of administration and justice, and no serious economic activity beyond the oil sector," the article explained. Finally, Downer proposed that "a role for the UN in reconciliation of a shattered society".

In effect, the Howard government is demanding control of East Timor's administration via a large, permanent police

presence, the installation of Australian officials in key positions of finance, justice and security, and the means for political manipulation via "reconciliation". Completely absent is any desperately-needed aid to provide basic services including welfare, education and health for the poverty-stricken country—one of the poorest in the world.

What "reconciliation" means is indicated by the ongoing efforts to oust Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, regarded as too closely aligned with Portugal. In less than a fortnight, Alkatiri has been compelled to cede substantial control over the country's security forces to President Xanana Gusmao and has lost two close allies—the defence and interior ministers—who have been forced to resign.

While Downer declared on Saturday that he would not take sides in East Timor's political conflict, Australia is obviously backing moves against Alkatiri. Yesterday, around 2,000 anti-Alkatiri demonstrators were shepherded into Dili by Australian troops to protest outside the current session of parliament and demand the sacking of the prime minister. At the same time, Major Alfredo Reinado, an anti-government "rebel leader", who, in other circumstances would be treated as a renegade and terrorist, is being feted by Australian military commanders, officials and media as a political leader-in-waiting.

The hypocrisy and cynicism of the military intervention is highlighted by the abrupt reversal of the Australian government's position on extending the UN mandate for East Timor. In early May, Washington and Canberra vigorously opposed calls from the East Timorese government and the UN special representative Sukehiro Hasegawa for a one-year extension of the UN Office for Timor-Leste (UNOTIL). UNOTIL had organised police, military and civilian advisers in all the areas outlined by Downer.

Both the Bush administration and the Howard government regarded UNOTIL as being too closely aligned with Alkatiri—and with Australia's rivals in Portugal and elsewhere. With UNOTIL's mandate due to expire on May 20, Washington and Canberra initially opposed any renewal,

then, on May 12, reluctantly accepted a one-month extension.

On the same day, without informing Dili, Prime Minister Howard announced that Australian warships would be deployed to waters near East Timor, then boarded a plane for Washington. Less than a fortnight later, using the pretext of violence stirred up by figures such as Reinado, Australian troops began landing in Dili.

Now Downer is demanding a mandate for a long term UN presence—dominated by Australian officials and police. Not surprisingly, he has also called for the current UN representative Hasegawa to be replaced and has objected to Portuguese paramilitary police operating independently of Australian military command.

At a regional security conference last weekend, Australian Defence Minister Brendan Nelson called for Asian countries, including Singapore and South Korea, to contribute to the international force on East Timor—a transparent attempt to further dilute any Portuguese or European involvement.

While Downer was careful to use diplomatic language in Dili, Murdoch's *Australian* has felt no such constraint. In his comment last Saturday entitled "A weightier role in Dili", editor-at-large Paul Kelly drew attention to Downer's plan, endorsed by cabinet's National Security Committee, for "an Australian military-civilian strategy for East Timor's future". "This envisages that Australia will control military security in the short term through the Australia-led coalition that now exists and influence East Timor's military structure in the long run. The aim is to minimise the influence of the UN or other nations, notably Portugal, on East Timor's military structure," he explained. The UN could be confined to "a stronger civilian role in East Timor's governance, its civil service and its police."

Kelly, who had clearly been briefed by the government, made no bones about the object of the exercise. "The lesson Australia has drawn from the intervention is that its security views cannot be marginalised any longer as they were ignored at the time of independence. The feature of East Timor's brief history is that Portugal has exercised more influence than Australia, notably on its language, constitution and institutions. This is one of the reasons for its failure. It is obvious that as ultimate security guarantor, Australia must exert a greater authority," he wrote.

Kelly's call for Australia to become a regional hegemon was, however, quite restrained compared to what foreign editor Greg Sheridan penned on the same day. In his column entitled "Throw Troops at Pacific Failures", he argued for a far broader and more aggressive Australian role, writing: "Australian policy in the South Pacific has been undergoing an agonising and profound revolution, from hands-off

respect for South Pacific sovereignty to deepening involvement. But it may be that we still have not conceived of our involvement in the most useful strategic terms."

Sheridan openly called for Canberra to use its power and influence to get rid of Alkatiri. "Certainly if Alkatiri remains Prime Minister of East Timor, this is a shocking indictment of Australian impotence. If you cannot translate the leverage of 1,300 troops, 50 police, hundreds of support personnel, buckets of aid and a critical international rescue mission into enough influence to get rid of a disastrous Marxist Prime Minister, then you are just not very skilled in the arts of influence, tutelage, sponsorship and, ultimately, promoting the national interest," he declared.

Sheridan went on to outline his vision for the region, insisting: "It is perhaps time that Australia conceived of itself as the 'US of the South Pacific'." He attempted to blunt the sharp edge of his message by referring to America's post war role in East Asia, but then continued: "Like the US in Asia, we should do this in part through a system of military deployments, though naturally we would not call them Australian bases... What I am arguing is that, as part of a wider program of assistance involving lots of Australian personnel operating in South Pacific government agencies, deployments of Australian soldiers should be semi-permanently stationed in East Timor, Solomon Islands and, if necessary, other regional basket cases."

Sheridan is simply stating what the Howard government is actually doing. Having secured the backing of the Bush administration by extending unconditional support for the US military subjugation of Afghanistan and Iraq, Australian imperialism is aggressively carving out its own sphere of influence in the South Pacific. Its strategy involves, not just transforming "failed states" into dependent vassals, but setting the course for broader inter-imperialist conflicts throughout the region.



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