

Espionage, blackmail and oil—Australian neo-colonialism in East Timor

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New revelations of illegal Australian government espionage operations during negotiations for the carve up of the oil- and gas-rich Timor Sea have laid bare the neo-colonial character of Canberra's relations with East Timor.

For decades, successive Labor and Liberal governments have engaged in sordid manoeuvres aimed at securing the Timor Sea energy bonanza for Australian corporations. In 1972, Canberra obtained a highly favourable maritime boundary agreement with Indonesia, which in part reflected the military junta's gratitude for Australian support for its mass murder of around 500,000 workers and peasants in the 1965–66 coup. In 1975, the Labor government of Gough Whitlam encouraged the Suharto regime to invade East Timor, then a Portuguese colony. In 1989, the next Labor government of Bob Hawke finalised the Timor Gap Treaty with Jakarta, illegally dividing up the territory's oil and gas, at the same time as tens of thousands of East Timorese were being killed by the Indonesian military. Ten years later, in 1999, Prime Minister John Howard militarily intervened in East Timor to oversee the transition to so-called independence in the aftermath of the Suharto regime's collapse and to secure Australian energy interests.

Subsequent negotiations between the Howard government and the East Timorese administration of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri were marked by unconcealed bullying and intimidation. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer repeatedly shouted at Alkatiri, threatening to give him a “tutorial in politics” by sabotaging all oil and gas projects, bankrupting the already impoverished state, unless Canberra's demands were agreed to. The Howard government earlier made clear its utter contempt for international law—under which the maritime border between Australia and Timor ought to be set at the mid-way point between the two states—by declaring it would not abide by any border rulings made

by the International Court of Justice or International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.

The Australian government was also accused of espionage. In September 2004, during negotiations in Canberra, Alkatiri attempted to evade surveillance by ordering the Timorese delegation to stop using their mobile phones and cease holding meetings in their hotel rooms.

Further details of this espionage operation have now emerged as part of an effort by Xanana Gusmao's current government to annul the CMATS Treaty (Current Arrangements in the Timor Sea). It is attempting to have the treaty subjected to legal arbitration, on the grounds that Australian spying during its negotiation invalidates the document.

Under CMATS, Dili agreed to Canberra's demand that the maritime border be left undefined for at least 50 years—that is, until after the seabed's oil and gas reserves are drained. The Greater Sunrise revenues are split 50-50 under the agreement, despite at least 80 percent of the territory belonging to East Timor under international law. If East Timor's sovereignty over its maritime territory were recognised, it would also be able to ensure the development of a gas processing facility on its territory. Currently, an Australian-American-Japanese consortium led by Woodside Petroleum is instead demanding a floating facility in the Timor Sea. The standoff has stalled any progress on the Timor Sea gas project, frustrating the Timorese government and apparently triggering the challenge to CMATS.

Bernard Collaery, a barrister and former Australian Capital Territory attorney-general, is part of a team of international lawyers hired by the Timorese government. He explained that the Australian government had bugged government offices in Dili in 2004 during negotiations on CMATS. “It was a Watergate situation,” he told the *Australian*. “They broke in and they bugged, in a total

breach of sovereignty, the cabinet room, the ministerial offices of then prime minister Alkatiri and his government. They placed clandestine listening devices in the ministerial conference room, we call it a cabinet room.”

He continued: “It was a carefully premeditated, involved, very lengthy operation with premeditated breaches of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, and premeditated breaches of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations... This is a criminal conspiracy, a break-in on sovereign territory and a breach of Australian law.”

Collaery added that the foreign minister directed the spying: “The operation was conducted by the Australian Secret Intelligence Service and of course it operated and reported at the relevant times to foreign minister [Alexander] Downer.”

Unsurprisingly, the Labor government closed ranks on the issue. Downer’s successor, Foreign Minister Bob Carr refused to deny the allegations, insisting he was bound by the “convention” barring ministers from commenting on intelligence matters. He added that the government regarded the CMATS Treaty as valid. The Labor government functions in Timor as the unabashed representative of Woodside Petroleum’s financial interests.

Australian imperialism’s filthy record in East Timor provides an object lesson in the politics of “humanitarian” interventionism.

In 1999, the Howard government seized on violence in the territory, inflicted by Indonesian soldiers and militias, before and after an independence referendum, to proceed with pre-prepared plans to dispatch a US-backed Australian intervention force. After concluding that continued Indonesian rule of East Timor was no longer tenable, Canberra sought to maintain control over the territory’s resources and shut out rival powers such as Portugal and China by presiding over a shift to so-called independence.

The espionage operations conducted during the CMATS negotiations were among many Australian government dirty tricks and provocations carried out in “independent” Timor to advance its interests. In 2006, Canberra helped instigate a split in the country’s armed forces in order to provide the pretext for a renewed Australian military intervention, accompanied by a violent regime-change operation that brought down Alkatiri’s Fretilin government.

These operations were all justified on the basis of

“saving lives” and lending “humanitarian” assistance to the Timorese people. The 1999 intervention was accompanied by a massive propaganda campaign, in which the major media outlets presented an Australian military operation as the only means to prevent genocide. The then opposition Labor Party rallied behind the Howard government, joined by the Greens, who have long been the most enthusiastic parliamentary advocates for Australian military interventions in the South Pacific.

The middle class pseudo-left organisations played a vital political role on behalf of the Australian ruling elite. The groups that now comprise Socialist Alliance organised “troops in” protests around the country ahead of the intervention, urging Howard to proceed. This helped surmount what an *Australian Financial Review* editorial described at the time as the post-Vietnam “taboo” against overseas military operations, and paved the way for an expansion of the Australian armed forces and subsequent operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Solomon Islands.

The Socialist Equality Party maintained a principled stand against this pro-imperialist consensus, opposing the Australian military intervention in 1999 and again in 2006. We again condemn Canberra’s illegal appropriation of Timor’s oil and gas resources and call for the prosecution of Howard, Downer and other government figures involved in illegal activities in the oppressed country. Our campaign in the current federal election is directed toward mobilising the working class against the US-led drive to war against China, and this requires the unification of working people and the poor throughout the region, including in East Timor and neighbouring states in the South Pacific, against imperialism and neo-colonialism. The natural resources of the region should be utilised in the interests of ordinary people, ensuring high living standards for all, on the basis of an internationally planned socialist economy.

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