

The Intervention in East Timor

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As East Timor rapidly approaches a formal declaration of independence next year, it is useful to consider what lessons might be learned from the Australian-led intervention, beginning in September 1999. The following observations are preliminary perspectives of a former U.S. government official, designed to contribute to the already-evolving analysis of this intervention by other practitioners and scholars.

Factors that Gave Rise to the Intervention and to U.S. Involvement

The September 1999 military intervention in East Timor came after widespread violence that followed a UN-sponsored referendum on independence in East Timor. In that referendum, the people of the territory opted, by a wide margin, not to accept incorporation into Indonesia. As a result, East Timor-based militia, supported by important elements of the Indonesian military, went on a rampage throughout the territory, destroying much of its infrastructure and perpetrating violence in which at least many hundreds (if not more) were killed.

There were a range of factors that led to the Australian intervention in East Timor. It is unclear whether any one, by itself, would have been sufficient to result in the intervention. But taken together, they clearly were.

Perhaps most important was the willingness of a capable regional military actor -- the Government of Australia -- to take the lead in intervening in the situation to end the violence. Australia's willingness to do so was itself the result of a range of factors.

First, the magnitude of human rights abuses taking place in East Timor, *combined* with extensive media attention, played an important role in encouraging Australian government

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action. In particular, the Australian public was appalled by reports of widespread abuses in East Timor, and made clear that they would support robust Australian government action.

As unimaginable as it may seem to Americans, the Australian public even supported a proposal for a tax increase that Australian government officials thought would be necessary to finance Australia's intervention.

From the Australian government and official international community perspective, a second critical factor was the perception of legitimacy and legality surrounding the possibility of the intervention. First, the Indonesian annexation of East Timor had never been recognized legally by the international community as a whole, though, quite ironically, it had been so recognized by Australia. Second, it was Indonesia itself that put East Timor on the road to independence with the decision of Indonesian President Habibie to permit a referendum in the territory. In that context, other governments that might otherwise have been reluctant to consider intervention were prepared to press the Government of Indonesia to permit entry of an outside force.

A third critical (and related) factor was the acquiescence of Government of Indonesia in the decision to intervene. Of course, there was enormous international political pressure being put on the Government of Indonesia, including U.S. suspension of military-to-military ties just before President Habibie agreed to the intervention, as well as prodding reportedly from within Southeast Asia. But Indonesian Government acquiescence was not inevitable, and it is highly unlikely that either the Australians or other governments from within the region could have been persuaded to support an intervention -- let alone participate in it -- in the absence of agreement by the Indonesian leadership.

Another important factor not only to the Australian Government, but also to the United States, was the impact on regional stability of continued unrest in Indonesia. In theory, if the international community was prepared to look the other way when confronted by widespread destruction and abuses in East Timor, as it essentially had done in 1975, the immediate impact on regional stability might conceivably have been modest. In other words, the insurgency in East Timor, by itself, was without the military capability to wreak havoc on the Indonesian archipelago -- or even on the entire island of Timor. In fact, American critics of aggressive U.S. diplomacy on East Timor essentially argued that U.S. officials were permitting the East Timor tail to wag the Indonesian dog.

This realist critique, however, missed the reality that the manner in which Indonesia addressed the situation in East Timor would fundamentally impact its ability to pursue normal relations with the rest of the world, or at least much of it.

For instance, even if administration officials were prepared to argue that the critical importance of Indonesia demanded that U.S. officials look the other way in East Timor, as the Ford administration essentially had done in 1975, they would have been disregarded by an American Congress prepared to sanction Indonesia for abuses in East Timor.

For the United States, both the regional stability and human rights concerns played major roles in the decision to provide diplomatic support for the intervention. Finally, for at least some American officials, East Timor in early September represented a major test of UN credibility. If, after debacles in Somalia and Rwanda earlier in the decade, the UN failed in East Timor, UN peacekeeping might have suffered a fatal blow.

In terms of U.S. *participation* in the InterFET force, however, human rights and regional stability may not have been sufficient factors to prompt U.S. military participation. A critical additional element was the desire on the part of U.S. officials to be responsive to a request from Australia -- a trusted and valued ally with a highly capable military.¹

The U.S. military contribution was more than trivial. According to unclassified records drawn from the author's personal files, the United States reached its maximum presence in East Timor on November 11, 1999, when we had 235 troops in Timor; on November 27, the U.S. reached its maximum in Australia, with 353. The maximum total complement, which included a marine expeditionary unit off shore, was just over 3000 in early October. The United States provided strategic and tactical fixed wing airlift, tactical helicopter airlift, intelligence, communications support, a civil-military operations center, a logistics planning cell, and other support. The Australians particularly valued the off-shore presence of an amphibious readiness group, which included the marines and served as an important demonstration of U.S. interest and resolve, as well as alliance solidarity. In fact, some Australians referred to the U.S. off-shore deployment as the "strategic reserve."

By all accounts, the U.S. contribution enhanced InterFET capabilities as well as credibility.

¹ The President was also lobbied by a range of other governments and the UN Secretary General, which undoubtedly helped to encourage his support for a U.S. military role.

The author's conclusion about the importance of Australia in U.S. decision-making results from observing the general tenor of the high-level discussions at the time, and also by contrasting U.S. action in East Timor with the general U.S. reluctance to commit troops to peacekeeping operations that are not seen as central to vital U.S. national security interests.

Whatever the United States would have done in the absence of Australian leadership, the Australian dimension helped to ensure the relatively rapid decision and deployment of Americans to East Timor and to Darwin. In fact, as the final papers describing the detailed nature of the U.S. commitment went to the President in mid-September, a key question from the National Security Advisor was whether the U.S. package addressed Australia's critical concerns.

Moreover, after the initiation of the UN Transitional Administration for East Timor, this very question was repeated time and again as the administration considered how the U.S. (military) Group East Timor would support the East Timorese transition post-InterFET. Of course, this willingness to assist a treaty ally was greatly facilitated by U.S. appreciation of the capabilities of the Australian military, and the resulting confidence that U.S. troops would not be drawn into deeper and deeper involvement in the operation. This point is critical to consider as one assesses the likelihood of similar U.S. support for operations led by other governments.

In sum, the key elements that resulted in the intervention were, first, a grisly human rights situation that was highly publicized; second, an interested and capable regional actor operating with strong support of its public; third, a strong international identification of perpetrators and victims, combined with a high degree of legitimacy surrounding international action; fourth, high perceived regional stakes; fifth, concern about the credibility of the United Nations; and, sixth, for the Americans, the request of a treaty ally, combined with an appreciation that the ally was capable of playing an effective lead role over time.

Timing and Goals of the Intervention

The intervention came upon the heels of a UN Assistance Mission for East Timor, known as UNAMET, that was not a peacekeeping force, but essentially a UN electoral assistance operation with military liaison officers. UNAMET was not under the authority of the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), but under the guidance of the Department of Political Affairs (DPA).

The UNAMET mission was the steward of a very fragile pre-referendum process, with security in the hands of the Indonesian authorities. That arrangement reflected the May 5, 1999 Agreement Between Indonesia and Portugal on the Question of East Timor, as well as an associated agreement, with annexes, between the UN, Indonesia and Portugal, regarding modalities. The provisions made clear that the Government of Indonesia would be responsible for security, and that arrangement -- as troubling as it may have been -- was widely believed to be an essential precondition for Indonesian support of the referendum process.

Even as security conditions deteriorated in the period following the May agreement, the Indonesians made it clear that it was only they who would retain responsibilities for security in the territory.

Thus, in the months before the referendum, as violence continued by militias supported by elements of the Indonesian armed forces, the goal of the UN and the international community was to use diplomatic suasion to urge Indonesian authorities to protect citizens in East Timor, and to ensure at least enough stability to permit the referendum to go forward. And while the threat of large-scale violence was always present, there was at least some optimism within the diplomatic community in the days preceding the referendum that violence following the vote might be short-lived.²

Of course, by early September, with the Indonesian military authorities proving either unwilling or unable to stop the carnage in the territory, there did not seem to be an alternative to military intervention to preserve the UN transition process and safeguard the lives and well-being of the people of East Timor.

The goals of the intervention -- a *green-helmeted* coalition of the willing led by the Government of Australia -- were simple, and described in the UN Security Council's resolution on East Timor: "to restore peace and security in East Timor, to protect and support UNAMET in carrying out its tasks and, within force capabilities, to facilitate humanitarian assistance operations."

There was a unanimity of objectives among all the players, from Australia, to the United States and Europe, even to governments in Southeast and East Asia. To be sure, there were some

² At the time, discussions were underway at the UN on the nature of the follow-on UN presence that would be required in a transition and post-independence East Timor, and it was not at all clear whether or how the Indonesian authorities would be prepared to relinquish responsibility for security -- especially as a vote for independence would have to be followed by the Indonesian Parliament's approval of such a separation for East Timor.

tensions, in particular, some skepticism within the region about the strong role being played by Australia, but these did not represent fundamental policy differences.

Assessing the Intervention

It is useful to consider three stages of outside intervention in assessing recent international community involvement in East Timor: first, the initial deployment of UNAMET in the spring of 1999; second, the InterFET military intervention itself, beginning in September; and third, the deployment of the force under the blue-helmeted UN Transitional Administration in East Timor that followed the InterFET intervention.

The UNAMET Mission and the failure to address violence before the InterFET intervention. The understandings reached between the Portuguese, the Indonesians and the UN in May 1999 did not envision an international force with the capacity of deterring violence. Rather, they envisioned the deployment of UNAMET (again, essentially as an electoral assistance mission), and a very telescoped schedule leading to a referendum. The obvious question is whether the international community made an error in acquiescing in these arrangements.

It is not clear, however, that this situation could have been easily avoided. First, the agreements on the referendum process were essentially between the governments of Indonesia, Portugal and the UN. U.S. policy had been to avoid owning this issue, as we sought to encourage the parties to resolve their differences taking into account the sentiments of the people of East Timor. Second, the Indonesian Government did not seem prepared to relinquish control over security. Moreover, having agreed to the referendum in the first place and with a military that had a fair amount of capability when it chose to use it, the Government of Indonesia had at least a defensible claim to retaining responsibility in this area.

Under those circumstances, the incentives for any other government to insist on deploying their own soldiers into an uncertain environment were limited.

Should the international community have pushed harder for a more robust presence at the outset, even if doing so would have threatened Indonesian Government willingness to agree to the referendum process itself? Could the international community have generated the diplomatic will to press the Indonesian government successfully to permit a force capable of deterring

conflict? And even if it could, in the absence of a clear and present threat, would the Australians and others have been prepared to send such a force?

It is far from certain that these obstacles could have been overcome. Given the choice between what occurred, including the killings and destruction, the resulting entry of the InterFET force and the progress toward independence, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the continuation of the *status quo* in East Timor (that is, the continued denial of self-determination for the people of East Timor), most of the people of East Timor may have chosen the former. Nonetheless, this is a very unsettling assessment, given the grave human rights abuses that did take place – with the international community standing by -- prior to the InterFET deployment.

The speed of international response when the post-referendum violence began. Were planning and coordination efforts adequate? Given that the risks of post-referendum violence were well-understood by UN officials and UN member governments, a more pertinent question may be whether there was adequate contingency planning for responding to a bad-case scenario.

This is a complicated issue, as planning can take place in many ways and at several levels: at the policy level in Washington and other capitals,³ between governments and at the United Nations, and at the military operational level. A broad review of the issue is beyond the scope of this paper. What follows are some impressions of the author and tentative observations about U.S. policy-level planning for the contingency that emerged.

On the military side, there does seem to have been thinking in Australia about Australian capacity to respond to the sort of outbreak of violence that took place in early September 1999. Late in 1998, for instance, the Australians reportedly realized they needed to take concrete measures to enhance infantry readiness. Moreover, prior to the events of early September, then-Major General Peter Cosgrove apparently led a limited access contingency planning effort,⁴ though the author does not know its level of detail. There apparently were also discussions at the U.S. Pacific Command about the force structure that might be necessary to implement a more robust operation in East Timor. Although the author has not obtained precise information on the

³ In using terms such as "policy level" or "pol-mil" planning in this section, the author is generally referring to Washington-based, interagency planning that seeks to integrate civilian and military dimensions.

⁴ Author's discussion with General Cosgrove, August 2001. Cosgrove, who led the InterFET operation, served as Commander 1st Division and Deployable Joint Force Headquarters (Australia).

timing of these latter two sets of actions, they seem to have taken place within the month or two prior to the outbreak of post-referendum violence.

At about the same time, an Australian paper with a three brigade peacekeeping operation had been shared with U.S. officials, and a senior Australian military official had been encouraging UN Secretariat officials to think about follow-on, more robust, peacekeeping options following the referendum.

On the policy side in Washington, NSC Deputies had met on East Timor peacekeeping issues on two or three occasions in the several months leading up to the referendum. Moreover, U.S. officials at the working level had been engaged in planning and discussion about a post-election UN presence in the territory. Finally, in the summer of 1999, efforts were made within the government to alert senior foreign and defense officials of the possibility of widespread violence after the referendum, and NSC Deputies, just prior to the crisis, requested planning information from the U.S. military on the issue. However, this occurred late in August, and there does not seem to have been early and detailed planning, at the policy level, for a worst case scenario, either within the U.S. government or between governments interested and involved in this issue.

A key question is whether U.S. policy-makers ought to have undertaken Washington—based pol-mil contingency planning, and whether they should have been more aware of, and involved in, whatever military planning for contingencies was underway in the summer of 1999. Perhaps such actions would have made for a more rapid response in early September.

On the other hand, given the general speed (or lack thereof) of international action to address man-made conflicts elsewhere around the world, the international response in this case was arguably swift -- at least in relative terms. The UN resolution authorizing the InterFET deployment came on September 15, and was the result of aggressive diplomacy that followed post-referendum violence that began on or around September 3. Moreover, the arrival of the first InterFET troops began on September 20, about five days after the UN vote.

It is also worth noting that extensive early discussion (and debate) about an intervention option, especially between governments, could have had two negative impacts. First, if intergovernmental discussions on contingencies (and response options) took place in the run-up to the referendum, it would have been difficult to have such discussions quietly, and – if they became known to the Government of Indonesia -- they could have provided a pretext to cancel

(or postpone) the referendum. Second, at least from the U.S. Government perspective, without the reality of a crisis, and the reality of a trusted ally asking urgently for help, it is unclear whether agencies in general – and the Department of Defense in particular – would have been prepared to put meaningful options on the table. Moreover, early presentation of such options might have come with some risk. In the absence of the high-level representations from Australian allies that only came with the crisis, senior U.S. officials – presented with options in a non-emergency setting -- might have foreclosed the possibility of responses that ultimately became U.S. policy.

These dilemmas – the obstacles to planning and the potential downsides – resulted from the simple fact that the United States, while ultimately prepared to play actively on the East Timor issue, was not eager to take a leading role. Thus, at the policy level, any detailed (and early) contingency planning for a worst-case scenario might well have required a joint effort with the Government of Australia.⁵

At the same time, it is hard to argue against the basic proposition that a higher degree of interagency contingency pol-mil planning would have not only speeded the United States response, but also helped to avoid some initial misunderstanding between the U.S. and Australia, when Australia's political leadership expressed some irritation about the perceived ambiguity of the American response.⁶

Finally, on the issue of coordination, it is important to credit the successful Australian effort at building support and encouraging participation for the multinational force. In short order, Australian officials were able to assemble a grouping of governments to participate in the InterFET force. This not only enhanced the credibility of the InterFET effort, but demonstrated that a strong regional actor can engage effectively in coalition-building for multilateral peace operations.

The size of the InterFET Force. During the week of September 5, there was some concern among senior U.S. officials that the size of the force being contemplated by the

⁵ This is not to understate the considerable interaction that *did* take place between U.S. and Australian officials. In any event, it would be very valuable to explore the degree of pol-mil planning for a worst-case scenario that may have occurred within the Government of Australia.

⁶ Despite this conclusion, it is worth mentioning that, from the U.S. perspective, the response came very quickly, as foreign policy Principals first met on the crisis on Monday September 6 (after Deputies had met earlier). On Wednesday morning, September 8, when they next met, Principals made a firm decision to recommend to the President that the United States contribute militarily to the Australian-led effort.

Australians -- about three brigades and up to about 10,000 troops -- was likely to be inadequate. At one high-level White House meeting, one or more officials suggested that, to avoid getting bogged down, the Australians ought to have far more troops given the uncertainty of the environment. Moreover, while this meeting took place before we had a detailed Australian concept of operations, it did occur after the Australians made clear they would not go in without the agreement of the Government of Indonesia.

Of course, it quickly became apparent that a highly disciplined force, robust rules of engagement, and a willingness to use deadly force (and to demonstrate that willingness) were all force multipliers, making the deployment, initially at only several thousand but growing to as many as 10,000, adequate to do the job.

According to the Government of Australia, by September 29, 10 days after the first InterFET troops landed, the force had about 3700 personnel in East Timor.

The initial plan was to build out carefully from Dili and, by early October, Baucau airfield toward the east had been secured and troops had carried out patrols and operations in a number of provincial towns and cities. According to the Australian Defence [sic] Force, InterFET ultimately included 22 nations, and, at its peak, consisted of about 10,000 personnel, with the Australians contributing just over half of the force with three infantry battalion groups, headquarters and support units and maritime and air assets.

Transition to the UNTAET force. It is clear that the military component of the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) operation that evolved out of InterFET was very much informed by the experience of early September. Where before September, it was far from clear that the Indonesian government would permit a robust, blue-helmeted, peacekeeping force to operate in the territory in the transition to independence, after the crisis and the intervention, there was no question that the UNTAET force would have to be very robust and very credible.

A key to the successful transition was the willingness of Australia -- and the Australian force commander -- to continue to play a leadership role in transitioning the force, and -- although at a reduced level -- for the government of Australia to continue to serve, in many respects, as the backbone of the operation.

In fact, the InterFET-UNTAET transition strategy began prior to the initial InterFET deployment. In developing the InterFET intervention option, the Australians made clear that they envisioned handing over InterFET to a blue-helmeted operation, consistent with a four-phase approach that included establishing the preconditions for deployment, inserting InterFET, restoring peace and security and transferring InterFET to a UN peacekeeping operation.

U.S. officials resisted the Australian desire to put into the Security Council resolution a target date for a handover -- and the U.S. position was, in fact, probably the right one. But, in defense of the Australians, they were committed to ensuring the success of the follow-on UN force, and thus were probably unconcerned that a target date signaled any lack of resolve.⁷

In any event, very shortly after they had stabilized the situation, the Australians moved forward on plans for a progressive handing over of the operation to UNTAET, in a series of stages, moving over time from the least contested and least dangerous part of the territory to the areas of greatest conflict. In this respect, the continued role that Australia envisioned for itself undoubtedly gave it much greater credibility and authority in dealing with the UN in the planning for the progressive withdrawal of INTERFET.

The Role of the Military Intervention: Creating Space for Transitional Activity

There is overwhelming support for an independent East Timor among inhabitants in the territory. Although troops may be engaged in civic action projects, the role of the UN force, in essence, has been to deter militia who wish to challenge independence, in circumstances where the Indonesian authorities are either unable or unwilling to prevent infiltration.

InterFET and UNTAET have created a degree of space for a broad range of civic institution-building, from repair of infrastructure, to stabilization of the economy, to establishing representative government, where none had existed -- or, to put it more accurately -- where the little that had existed had been destroyed.

As a result of the combination of UNTAET creating a very secure environment, the absence of ambiguity about the territory's future, and the near-absolute absence of local

⁷ Frankly, U.S. opposition to a target date for withdrawal was probably informed by the U.S. experience in setting such target dates. In the U.S. case, they often *have* signaled a lack of continuing military resolve.

infrastructure and capacity, East Timor is a pristine laboratory in which to examine the challenges and potential for nation-building.

James Traub, writing in the July-August 2000 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, provided a graphic description of the task, in an interview with a legal scholar in the UNTAET mission. The scholar remarked, “[i]n Kosovo, we had judges, lawyers, prosecutors; the trouble was finding one who didn't have a Yugoslav past or a Serbian collaborator past. Here you don't have a single lawyer..... It did not help matters any that the militias had burned or stolen every single law book in East Timor.”

Traub alludes to the pervasiveness of the UN transitional administration with his description of the "new bureaucrats of the East Timor Authority, as the state administration is called, [who] work out of an auditorium located right behind the Governor's House ... [with] ... the names of the nascent ministries taped to the back of computers: Civil Service, Water Supply, Agriculture, Judicial Affairs, and so on. Their job...is to supply the Timorese with what they don't have, but also to train them to take over the work themselves...”

Thankfully, these efforts have developed considerably over the past year, as the UN's Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) has progressively transferred authority for governance to East Timorese leaders. That process evolved this summer with successful elections for a constituent assembly, and will continue with the formal transition to independence expected in the spring of 2002.⁸

Conclusion

On balance, the InterFET intervention is fairly characterized as a success. Unquestionably, the intervention alleviated death, suffering and massive violation of human rights. It also significantly reduced the likelihood that internal conflict would recur in the future. Similarly, the stability provided by both the InterFET and the UNTAET military forces has provided the space necessary for post-conflict peace-building, while the international community develops not an *exit strategy*, but a strategy for the completion of the transition process. It is now up to the people of East Timor, assisted by the United Nations and the international community, to create the political, economic and social conditions that will best ensure long-term peace and stability.

⁸ To its credit, the UN, with the support of the Government of Australia and others, envisions a post-independence UN presence as well. The goal, of course, is to ensure the continuation of political progress and stability in the newly created nation-state.