
The Road to INTERFET: Reflections on Australian Strategic Decisions Concerning East Timor, December 1998-September 1999

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In 1999, as Deputy Secretary for Strategy in the Australian Department of Defence, I had some involvement in strategic decisions about East Timor which led to the deployment of INTERFET. This essay, based more on recollection than scholarship, offers reflections on some of those decisions. It considers especially the questions of Australia's overall strategic aims in 1999, and how well they were fulfilled, and Australia's attitude towards the need for a full-scale peacekeeping force in East Timor before the ballot. On the former it concludes that, notwithstanding INTERFET's operational success, the Australian Government completely failed to achieve the strategic objectives it had set itself at the start of 1999. On the latter it argues that ambivalence about the need for a pre-ballot peacekeeping force prevented the Government lobbying as hard as we could have for one to be deployed, which may have contributed materially to the tragedy in September.

This essay offers a contribution to the debate about the circumstances which led to Australia's largest, most demanding and potentially most risky military operation in recent decades—the deployment of forces to stabilise East Timor under INTERFET in September 1999.¹ The aim is to provide a brief account of some aspects of Australian strategic decisions in relation to East Timor in 1999. This seems worth doing because, notwithstanding the dramas of the war on terror, the East Timor crisis remains the most complex, most contentious and most consequential strategic crisis-management challenge Australia has faced in recent times. It is the only recent major strategic crisis in which Australian decisions had a material influence on major events elsewhere.

The account of these decisions given here is not comprehensive. It is concerned specifically with the chain of events that lead Australia to the situation in which a major military deployment to East Timor seemed an inescapable necessity. It focuses narrowly on the Australian perspective,

¹ My reflection on the events of 1998 and 1999 has been enriched by discussions with many people at the time and over the years since, including a number of valued colleagues in Government service, and scholars who have since studied the matter in much more depth than I have. I would like to thank in particular David Connery, whose fine doctoral work on Australian strategic decision-making about East Timor will make a big contribution to our understanding, and above all the late Allan Taylor, whose judgment, intelligence, integrity and sense of responsibility made him a model for all who worked with him.

and within that perspective it selects a few themes and issues for exploration. Nor does it claim to be a definitive account of the events it describes: many of the issues remain contested, and no full, impartial and authoritative account is yet available. It aims to supplement rather than in any way replicate or replace several good accounts already available.² It is based substantially on personal recollection: throughout 1999 I served as the Deputy Secretary for Strategy in the Australian Department of Defence, and in that capacity was closely involved in the development of Australia's responses to the crisis. That means I had as clear a view of what happened as anyone, but that view is necessarily from only one perspective, and it also means my account is not impartial. Readers should take this into account in judging what follows.

Status Quo Ante

When President Suharto resigned in May 1998, East Timor had been part of Indonesia for over twenty years. This incorporation was not recognised by the UN or much of the international community. But Australian Governments of both parties had long acquiesced to Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor. They had three reasons: they placed high priority for good relations with Indonesia, they were uncertain about the viability of an independent East Timor, and they had real doubts that Australian support for East Timorese independence could make any difference to what happened there. However this policy was never popular at home. As concern about the US-Australian Joint Facilities faded from the mid-1980s, East Timor and associated questions about our relationship with Indonesia became the most politically contentious issue in Australian foreign policy. Moreover, East Timor was a problem for Indonesia internationally. In the United States and Europe, concern about East Timor limited Indonesia's ability to get a hearing for its concerns and interests. Especially after Indonesia's economic collapse in the Financial Crisis of 1997-8, Jakarta needed all the friends it could get. Canberra was concerned that the East Timor issue was making it harder for Indonesia to get the international support it needed for economic recovery.

After Suharto

In the second half of 1998, after Suharto's departure, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) initiated an informal policy review to consider the implications of this momentous event for Australian policy towards Indonesia. It consulted other departments and agencies, including

² See for example: Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor in Transition 1998-2000: An Australian Policy Challenge* (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2001); Don Greenlees and Robert Garran, *Deliverance: The inside story of East Timor's fight for freedom* (Sydney: Allan and Unwin, 2002); James Cotton, *East Timor, Australia and Regional Order: Intervention and its Aftermath in Southeast Asia* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), and the writings of Jim Dunn.

the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) and Defence, to sound out approaches and possibilities. The broad conclusion was that Australia had a big stake in the success of the process of *reformasi* which was gathering momentum in Indonesia, and especially in the prospects for genuine democracy and for reform of the role of the Indonesian armed forces (TNI).³ However, the new president, Dr Habibie, appeared erratic and weak. It seemed quiet likely that he would not have the authority and political skill required to manage the fundamental constitutional transformation that Indonesia was apparently embarked upon. His relationship with TNI was especially problematic. The success of the reform program was therefore far from taken for granted; indeed on balance it would be fair to say that Australian officials thought them more likely than not to fail. Attempts at democratic politics in Indonesia had in the past proved collapsed in chaos and violence, and this pattern seemed likely to recur, with some form of reversion to authoritarian rule. Even if TNI did not seize power directly, it seemed likely to be a critical player in Indonesia's political evolution. It was therefore broadly agreed that Australia's top priorities in the post-Suharto era was to support Indonesia's democratic transformation, and to sustain a good relationship with TNI.

However, attention was also given to the opportunity that Suharto's departure offered in relation to East Timor. In the mid-1990s, as Vice President, Habibie had supported a plan to gain international acceptance of Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor by offering some kind of act of self-determination. It was hoped that East Timorese could be induced to express support for their incorporation in Indonesia, perhaps in return for the grant of some form of limited provincial autonomy within the Indonesian republic. The plan was opposed by TNI, and vetoed by Suharto. But with Suharto gone, there was a chance that the plan might be resurrected. In June 1998, soon after becoming president, Dr Habibie had raised the idea of East Timor being granted 'special status'—a form of provincial autonomy—and had initiated discussions with Portugal on the issue. Australia soon became active in canvassing East Timorese views on that possibility, and in encouraging Jakarta to draw the East Timorese into their discussions with Portugal. Among the options canvassed in the post-Suharto policy review was the possibility that Australia might try to get involved in these processes.

Australia's Initiative

The proposal to take an initiative on East Timor by actively and publicly advocating some form of autonomy for East Timor was discussed among senior officials at an informal meeting around late August 1998, and the idea that this could be done by sending a letter from the Prime Minister to President Habibie was raised. Arguments in favour of the initiative were that

³ The formal name of Indonesia's armed forces was changed from ABRI to TNI in mid-1999. For simplicity I will refer to them as TNI throughout this paper.

if it succeeded, Australian domestic concerns about East Timor would be placated, and Indonesia's standing in the world would improve, so helping it to attract the international support needed for economic recovery and political transformation. It was also clearly recognised that, even if Jakarta did not take up the suggestion, the Australian Government would gain credit for advocating it. The argument against was that if Habibie pushed his ideas on East Timor too hard, it might cause tension between him and TNI, and therefore jeopardise Indonesia's democratic wider reform program. According to this line of thinking, it would be better not to distract Habibie from the main reform agenda and risk his key relationship with TNI over an issue which, while important, was secondary to Australia's major interests in the success of Indonesia's post-Suharto transformation. No clear resolution of these competing arguments was reached in August.

However over the following few months the proposal was further developed by DFAT and PM&C, and after extensive discussion in which it seems Mr Downer urged a somewhat reluctant Mr Howard, it was decided that the Prime Minister should write to Habibie suggesting ways in which the East Timor issue could be handled. The letter was signed on 19 December 1998.⁴ The initiative was not formally considered by the National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSC), but it appears that some NSC Ministers, not including the Defence Minister, were informally consulted or informed before the letter was sent.

The Prime Minister's letter emphasised that Australia wanted East Timor to remain part of Indonesia, and the proposal it made for an act of self-determination was couched clearly in the context of the discussions already underway between Indonesia and Portugal on East Timor's future in the UN. The act of self-determination which Howard proposed would only occur after a period of autonomy within Indonesia. It was not therefore a radical reversal of existing Australian policy. However it was a distinct policy shift. Australian governments had supported the principle of self-determination for East Timor, but they had never proposed the holding of any form of act of free choice to bring it about. Moreover the fact that Australia's policy shift was couched in a letter from the Prime Minister to Habibie did raise the profile of the issue in the bilateral relationship, and constituted a clear new phase in Australian diplomacy on the issue.

From the outset, Australia's new policy suffered from distinct internal strains. On the one hand, Australia wanted East Timor to remain part of Indonesia. On the other, we wanted an act of self-determination. Combining these two elements into one policy reflected a belief that an act of self-determination had a reasonable chance of resulting in a decision by the East Timorese to remain part of Indonesia. This belief was implicit rather than explicit, and was perhaps never fully exposed and tested as the proposal to send the

⁴ For the text of the letter, see: Commonwealth of Australia, Annex 2, pp. 181-182.

letter was developed. In retrospect it is obvious that it was wishful thinking, and this should have been clear at the time.

It is important to stress here that, as Howard wrote to Habibie, East Timor's continued incorporation into Indonesia was clearly Australia's firm preference in late 1998 and early 1999. Canberra remained convinced by the arguments that had shaped policy since 1975, reinforced by a growing concern that an independent East Timor would be economically unviable and politically unstable, and thus a liability to regional security for which Australia would have to take prime responsibility. There was also real concern about how both the process and outcome of a move to independence would affect our relations with Indonesia. Since 1999 some of the players have suggested that in fact they personally, or the Government as a whole, had developed a clear commitment to independence for East Timor as early as late 1998, before the letter was sent to Habibie. Such claims are hard to credit: they are simply inconsistent with the all of the Government's words, and most of its deeds, until at least the middle of 1999. They most likely reflect post-facto rationalisation of outcomes which were contrary to Australia's original intentions, but for which the Government was later keen to claim credit. It is true that Downer in particular was energetic in the later months of 1998 in pursuing initiatives to bring the East Timorese into the debate about autonomy options, and authorised direct discussions with Xanana Gusmao in prison in Jakarta. But there was no suggestion at this time that he or anyone else in Government believed independence for East Timor was either achievable or desirable. Most probably the key motive for Ministers in the policy moves of late 1998, including the letter to Habibie, was to ensure that Australian policy was not 'left behind' by moves in Jakarta, especially as the Labor opposition had already started to move away from the old consensus on that policy and was more actively advocating changes in East Timor's status.

Habibie's Response

Habibie's initial reception of the letter in late December was distinctly negative. On first reading he apparently responded by saying that the kind of protracted transition process Howard had suggested would result in sustained violence among East Timorese, and he suggested in passing that it might be better to simply offer independence immediately. However nothing more was heard from him until, on 27 January 1999, it was announced in Jakarta that if the regional autonomy being suggested for East Timor by Indonesia in the negotiations then underway with the Portugal was not acceptable to the East Timorese, then Habibie would suggest to Indonesia's Parliament that East Timor be 'released' from Indonesia. This was a genuine policy revolution. It remains unclear to what extent it was caused by John Howard's letter. Habibie may well have been already contemplating fairly radical steps before he received it, but evidently had taken no decision. He could presumably have reached that decision without

Howard's intervention, but some anecdotal evidence suggests that a re-reading of Howard's letter in late January provided the final spur.

Habibie's announcement was quite unexpected in Australia, and deeply unsettling. From that point on it became clear in Canberra that an early move to independence had suddenly become a highly likely, and potentially highly problematic, outcome. Was Howard's letter a good idea, then? *Prima facie* it seems to have provoked a response that Australia did not expect and did not welcome. That provides strong grounds for criticising the decision to send it. And the whole episode does reinforce the lesson that such diplomatic gestures need to be approached with the utmost caution, backed by more reflection and analysis of real interests and possible consequences than seems to have happened here.⁵ On the other hand, to Australia's great good fortune, some of the adverse consequences feared by those who opposed sending the letter did not occur: In particular, Indonesia's democratic transition proceeded relatively smoothly. Finally, it is hard to argue that Canberra should have predicted Habibie's response. Even though Habibie was a notoriously volatile decision maker, Howard had no reason to expect that his views would be as influential with Habibie as they appear to have been. On balance I would say that the decision to send the letter was poor policy-making, but that it was not the principal mistake in Australia's East Timor policy before INTERFET. That was still to come.

Australia Adjusts

Whatever role Howard's letter had in provoking it, Habibie's new stance put serious stresses on Australia's policy framework. In a series of official-level and ministerial-level meetings in February and March, some principles were established and practical measures taken to adjust to the new circumstances. First, it was agreed broadly that Australia had four key policy objectives in relation to East Timor;

- East Timor should remain part of Indonesia;
- The relationship with Indonesia was more important to Australia than the future of East Timor, so that we should avoid outcomes which damaged or jeopardised that relationship;
- The relationship with TNI was especially important, because of its expected role in Indonesia's political future, so special care should be taken to protect that relationship.

⁵ Some could argue that the proposals in the letter were in themselves relatively sensible, and if adopted they may well have produced a better result for all concerned. But subsequent experience suggests that Habibie was right to say that a protracted period of transition would create an unmanageable security problem in East Timor. And there is some evidence to suggest that Habibie was especially incensed by Howard's reference to France's Matignon Accords on New Caledonia, which may have spurred to him take radical action.

- We should avoid having to deploy a large Australian Defence Force (ADF) contingent to East Timor if at all possible.

Second, it was recognised that, despite our concern to avoid major military deployments, there was a significant possibility that a major international Peacekeeping Force (PKF) would be needed in East Timor. A number of scenarios were considered, but the one thought most likely to cause serious problems was a sudden Indonesian withdrawal from East Timor, which might trigger a struggle between pro and anti-independence elements in East Timor itself. The capacities for fighting on both sides were clear: Falantil had fought a pro-independence insurgency against Indonesia since 1975, and TNI had sponsored the growth a number of armed pro-independence militia groups. Canberra fully recognised the potential for violence, and the possibility that we might have to help prevent it.

Third, it was recognised that if a major PKF was required, it would be in Australia's interests to play a major role. We knew that Australia would have much at stake directly in the stability and viability of an independent East Timor. Moreover international opinion would expect Australia to take a lead: there was a sense that if Australia didn't lead, no one else would. Some press reporting suggests that as early as 14 February 1999 the UN Secretary General had indicated his hopes that Australia would contribute to any PKF needed.⁶ And there was likely to be strong domestic support for a leading Australian role. The Australian Labor Party had moved to a more pro-East Timor policy, and could be expected to support, and public opinion remained sensitive to the plight of the East Timorese. It was envisaged that Australia might need to be in a position to contribute as much as a brigade group to a PKF which might last for years. It was also recognised that there was nothing Australia could do alone: if a broad-based civil war broke out in East Timor between pro and anti independence forces, the task of stabilising the situation would be beyond the capacity of the ADF to contain.

The policy conclusions drawn from these considerations were that, while we should continue to work to reduce the likelihood that a PKF would be required, steps should also be taken to enhance Australia's capacity to deploy and sustain a brigade-group sized contingent for an extended period if this should prove necessary. To do this, it was proposed to bring an additional Brigade up to 30 days' notice to move from 30 June 1999. This was discussed and agreed by NSC, and announced on 11 March 1999. Although in announcing this decision the Government said that it had not been made solely as a result of developments in relation to East Timor,⁷ there is no doubt that the possibility of substantial commitments to East Timor was the key driver. Soon after, detailed thought began to be given within the Australian Defence Headquarters (ADHQ) to planning for a PKF to

⁶ Matthew Horan, 'UN wants us in East Timor', *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 March 1999, p. 21.

⁷ Commonwealth of Australia, p. 53.

take responsibility for security over from TNI if East Timor opted for independence. A one-star officer was committed to this task, and he visited the United Nations in March/April to begin discussions with the UN headquarters in New York on the how such a PKF might work.

At this stage Australian policy was trying to balance two competing imperatives. On the one hand was a strong preference not to find ourselves drawn into a major military role in securing East Timor. On the other hand there was a clear recognition that President Habibie's announcement had changed the dynamics in East Timor fundamentally, that independence was now a highly likely outcome, and that given East Timor's history, the probability that a major peacekeeping force would be needed was quite high. Balancing these imperatives was made more complex by concerns that precautionary preparations for a PKF role might become self-fulfilling prophecies, building a momentum of their own and making the deployment of a PKF more likely. There seemed a risk that the more willing we and others appeared to deploy a major PKF, the less incentive both the Indonesians and the East Timorese had to manage security in East Timor on their own.

This was the line of reasoning underlying the position put by the then Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Dr Ashton Calvert, to a US Assistant Secretary of State, Dr Stanley O. Roth, in a much-reported exchange in late February 1999 in which Dr Calvert indicated Australia's reluctance to see a full-scale PKF deployed,⁸ and by Mr Downer and by the Prime Minister at the same time.⁹ These remarks have been taken as indicated a settled and definite Australian opposition to the deployment of a PKF, whereas, as others have noted,¹⁰ they were reflecting only one element of a complex policy debate within the Australian system. In fact the balance of the debate in Canberra soon started to swing the other way. As the practicalities of the situation on the ground in East Timor became clearer over the coming months, the need for a PKF became clearer too, but the lingering reluctance to be drawn into a major military operation remained as an influence on Australian thinking, with consequences we will see below.

Security before the Ballot

Australia was not a direct participant in the key decisions about how the implementation of Habibie's new policy would be managed on the ground in East Timor. In March and April 1999, the modalities were worked out in negotiations for a Tripartite Agreement between Indonesia, Portugal and the UN. It was agreed that the UN would supervise a ballot in which East Timorese would be asked to choose between an autonomy proposal

⁸ See for example: Greenlees and Garran, pp. 151-152; Commonwealth of Australia, pp. 51-52.

⁹ See for example: Jill Jolliffe, 'Australia Blamed in East Timor Report', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 April 2004; Commonwealth of Australia, p. 45.

¹⁰ See for example: Greelees and Garran, p. 152; Commonwealth of Australia, p. 52.

presented by the Indonesian government, and full independence. From an Australian viewpoint the biggest and toughest questions concerned the maintenance of security in East Timor before and during the ballot. This issue now became the main focus of Australian policy concern.

The natural preference was for TNI to continue to hold responsibility for security in East Timor throughout the ballot process. While the province continued under Indonesian sovereignty, this was clearly an Indonesian responsibility, and as Indonesia had agreed to the conduct of the ballot, it seemed proper that Indonesia should take responsibility for maintaining the security needed to ensure the ballot could take place. TNI clearly had the best capacity to maintain order in East Timor, if they could be induced to use their capability responsibly and impartially. But it was also recognised the TNI was most unlikely to do this.

It is important at this point to clarify what Canberra did in fact believe about TNI's activities in East Timor at this time. Australia had been aware for some time that TNI had been actively supporting anti-independence militias in East Timor.¹¹ It became clear in the early months of 1999 that TNI support for the militia was continuing despite the new policy in Jakarta. President Habibie's relationship with TNI appeared complex and tense. The TNI leadership was opposed to independence, and could be expected to use all means, including violence and intimidation, to attempt to swing the vote against independence. All this was known and accepted by Australian decision makers. It is true however that at times the Government tried to play down in public the TNI role in supporting pro-independence militia in East Timor. Mr Downer for example at one stage said that such support was the work of 'rogue elements' in TNI. In saying this Mr Downer was going against the clear weight of intelligence reporting and assessment.¹² This perhaps reflected a desire not to damage relations with Indonesia, and especially with TNI. But while the command and control of TNI activities in East Timor was shadowy, there was no doubt that the problem was more serious than 'rogue elements'. It was clear in Canberra that TNI's role in supporting the militia and opposing independence meant that that the management of security up to and after the ballot was going to be a major issue that could not necessarily be left to Indonesia alone.

¹¹ As it happens a significant proportion of the intelligence assessments on this point available to the Government were leaked to the media over the course of 1999, and thus are available for scrutiny. To my recollection the leaked material more or less accurately reflects the overall conclusions of the assessments provided to Government.

¹² Downer's remarks were recognized as mistaken and misleading as soon as they were made. With his approval, a more accurate account was given by officials during senate estimates hearings a few weeks later, in the following terms: "We believe that Indonesian armed forces have been actively engaged in support and in encouraging the pro-integration movements and that that has contributed significantly to the security problems in East Timor. That has been the subject of repeated and very high-level representations by the Australian government to Indonesia." Hansard, 8 June 1999, <http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au/piweb/view_document.aspx?TABLE=estimate&ID=26814> [Accessed 16 February 2008]

Canberra's clear understanding of TNI's role in East Timor meant that there was an uneasy tension between wanting to hold Indonesia and TNI to its responsibilities for security through to the ballot, and not trusting them to do so. As we will see, the resulting policy dilemma was never completely resolved before events moved out of Australia's control. It became increasingly clear in Canberra however that while TNI should retain principal responsibility for security in East Timor, a major UN PKF should be deployed before the ballot as part of the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) to ensure that TNI behaved responsibly. Preliminary thinking in Canberra suggested that a PKF of around 12,000 to 16,000 military personnel would be needed. In late March a senior UN representative visiting Canberra to consult on preparations for the ballot was told by Australian officials that entrusting security in East Timor to TNI before, during and after the ballot would be risky because of TNI's support for the anti-independence militias, and its record of interference in electoral processes. Australian officials suggested that a full-scale military UN PKF should be deployed to East Timor before the ballot to help ensure security and to deter TNI from trying to sway the outcome with improper pressure. He was told that Australia would likely be willing to provide a major contribution to such a force. This advice was received positively by the UN official.

Australia's position in these discussions reflected the shift in views in Canberra noted above. Over the preceding few weeks, recognition of the need for such a force, and willingness to contribute substantially to it, had firmed in Canberra as the scale of TNI support for the militia had become clearer. But after the discussions with the UN in Canberra, Australian policy makers began to expect, even to assume, that the UN would make sure that provision for a full scale PKF was included in the Tripartite Agreement. Because of this, and perhaps also because of the unresolved ambivalence mentioned before, Canberra did nothing more to push for a PKF. With the benefit of hindsight, Australia's failure to push harder for a PKF to be included in the Tripartite Agreement may have been a significant oversight.¹³

Summit in Bali

Meanwhile the need for a PKF was dramatically affirmed by major outbreaks of violence at Liquica on 6 April, and some days later in Dili, involving anti-independence militia with evidence of TNI support. As a result of these incidents, John Howard decided to visit Indonesia and talk to President Habibie about the need for Indonesia to do more to ensure security for the ballot. But when they met at Bali on 27 April, a new element had entered the equation. The Tripartite Agreement had been finalised in New York a few days before. To Australia's surprise, the negotiated agreement made no provision for a full scale PKF; security would remain the responsibility of TNI,

¹³ Some of the atmospherics of the discussions on this issue at the UN are provided in Greenlees and Garran, p. 149.

and the UN would have only a modest police presence to provide security for UN personnel. This news changed the context for the Bali meeting substantially. Clearly Howard wanted to impress on President Habibie the importance of TNI playing their role properly and impartially. But the key question for the Bali meeting now was whether, and if so how hard, Australia should push Indonesia to allow revision of the agreement to incorporate a major PKF to provide an international security presence alongside TNI. This question brought to a head the ambivalence in Australian policy between seeking to avoid a major military commitment to East Timor, and recognising the need for a substantial military presence to ensure a peaceful and credible outcome to the UN-backed process about to be launched.

How Australia could navigate this dilemma was not resolved before the Bali meetings began. In preparatory discussions among Howard's delegation, some argued the merits of using the summit to push Habibie hard to allow the UN to deploy a full-scale peacekeeping force before the ballot. Other advisers, reflecting the ambivalence of earlier months, argued that Australia's role in such a force would be highly onerous, and that a PKF might in any case prove unnecessary. Some also argued that Habibie would probably refuse to allow a PKF, and that to push the matter too hard might upset the atmospherics of the summit. In part the differences among Australian policymakers at this point reflect the divergent dispositions of diplomats and strategists: diplomats tend to focus on desired outcomes and give highest priority to bringing them about, while strategists tend to focus on the worst outcomes and work hardest to avoid them. But it may also have been that those who had advised Howard to write to Habibie in December now felt some anxiety at the unintended costs which their initiative seemed likely to impose, if Australia found itself with a leading role in a major PKF.

Howard gave no clear indication of his own conclusions on this point before the meetings began. It remains a little uncertain whether, and if so how hard, Howard pushed Habibie to agree to a full-scale PKF in their long four-eyes meeting—which was, rather unusually, genuinely 'four eyes' only. There is no authoritative account of that meeting available from the Australian side. From the Indonesian side, we have an account from Habibie's well-respected international relations adviser, Dewi Anwar Fortuna, which suggests that Howard did raise the question of an international peacekeeping force directly and repeatedly, and was firmly rebuffed.¹⁴ A second meeting followed in which the two leaders were accompanied by large numbers of advisers on both sides. At that meeting Howard did not press for a PKF, but sought instead to encourage Habibie to allow a larger international police presence and a small number of military observers. There was no doubt that Habibie—under clear pressure from TNI chief General Wiranto—was reluctant to accept even these very modest suggestions. He argued that the agreement had already been finalised in

¹⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, p. 79.

New York between the principal parties, and there was no compelling reason to reopen it again. But after some discussion Habibie acquiesced to Howard's more modest proposals for extra police and some military observers. It was clear from all this that there would have been huge resistance in Indonesia to the deployment of a major PKF to East Timor before the ballot. But it also clear that no sustained and focused effort was made either by Australia or, it seems, by the UN to overcome that resistance. We can never now know whether, if pushed harder, Indonesia would have acquiesced. But it may well be that by not pushing harder at this time, both directly with Habibie and through others like the UN and the United States, we missed the last best chance to avoid the disasters of September.

Warning TNI and Preparing for Evacuation

As it was, the outcome left Australia, and the UN, in a difficult position. It seemed certain that TNI-backed militia, and elements of TNI itself, would continue to use violence to undermine the election process, threaten UN personnel, and perhaps to contest the outcome if the vote was for independence. The security provisions of the Tripartite Agreement were manifestly inadequate to prevent this. But the process of building up to the election was gathering momentum. A major international effort had been launched with thousands of people converging on East Timor to help make the ballot happen. No one seriously considered stopping it because of security concerns. Instead two other steps were taken.

First, in early May the UN asked Australia, in confidence, if it would be prepared to evacuate UN personnel from East Timor if security there collapsed. This would require Australia to plan and prepare for a large-scale military operation. The NSC considered this request and agreed, subject to the UN taking responsibility for getting Indonesia's agreement to any evacuation before it was launched. Planning was then initiated for what was called *Operation Spitfire*. This envisaged a substantial effort to collect UN personnel from points around East Timor and assemble them for evacuation by sea and air. Forces equivalent to about a brigade group were identified and assembled over the following months, with notice to move progressively shortening to 24 hours at the time of the ballot and immediately after, which was presciently identified in planning as the period of greatest risk of widespread violence.

Second, the Canberra decided to try to persuade TNI to scale back its support for the militia. The Vice Chief of the Defence Force (VCDF), AM Riding, travelled to Jakarta in July to meet his Indonesian counterpart, then General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, to deliver a carefully prepared set of talking points.¹⁵ He said that Australia, the United States and the UN were

¹⁵ Substantial extracts of these talking points were also published in the media later in the year.

aware of the scale of TNI support to the militia, and that it would be overwhelmingly in Indonesia's and in TNI's best interest for that support to stop and for the militia to be reined in. The response was cool, cordial and completely but non-committal. It had no noticeable effect on TNI activities in East Timor. And even at this late stage, this initiative to confront TNI over its activities in East Timor attracted criticism from inside the government in Canberra as potentially damaging to our relations with TNI.

Meanwhile, ADHQ continued to develop plans in consultation with the UN for a full-scale PKF for what became known as Phase Three. It was expected that if East Timor voted for independence, there would be a significant period after the ballot before Indonesia formally surrendered sovereignty: until then TNI would remain responsible for security. After that however it was likely that a major PKF would be needed as part of a wider UN assistance mission to a newly independent East Timor. No steps could be taken by the UN which appeared to prejudge the outcome of the ballot, so detailed planning and preparation in New York for this PKF were limited, but the preliminary work done in Canberra at this stage would prove invaluable come September.

After the Vote: The Decision to Launch INTERFET

Notwithstanding security concerns, the UN mission deployed effectively and preparations for the ballot went well. Voting proceeded relatively peacefully on 30 August 1999, with 98.6% turnout, and 78.5% support for independence. The result was announced on 4 September. Almost immediately widespread violence broke out, primarily by anti-independence militias backed, at least to a degree, by TNI. Over the next couple of days the violence spread around East Timor. There were fears, backed up by some intelligence reports, that very large numbers of East Timorese were being killed. There seemed a risk that the killing could reach genocidal proportions, though hard reports of killings were few, and many of the reports that were received turned out not to be true. Numbers killed remain unclear, but they were probably around 1500. There was also however a massive evacuation, and widespread destruction. In the days after the ballot announcement some 250,000 people moved across the border from East Timor into camps in West Timor. Most went voluntarily, many were probably coerced. A huge and systematic campaign of destruction left much of East Timor in ruins.

These events attracted intense international media focus over the next few weeks, and very strong domestic attention in Australia. All of the government's actions over coming days took place against a background of great public concern, and strong public expectations that the government would 'do something'.

The initial response was relatively simple. The violence on 4 and 5 September clearly threatened UN personnel. The UN asked Australia to mount an evacuation as we had promised. Op Spitfire was launched, and extraction of UN personnel began on 6 September. Jakarta had agreed to the operation, but there was significant concern about whether the militia, or TNI, would try to interfere with it on the ground, especially when it was decided to extend the evacuation to include not only expatriate UN employees but locally-engaged East Timorese who had worked for the UN and who feared militia retribution, and some prominent East Timorese public figures. In the event, partly thanks to the remarkable efforts of ADF personnel attached to the embassy in Jakarta and the consulate in Dili, who remained in Dili throughout this period, the evacuation was undertaken without serious incident and completed on 14 September .

At the same time, international attention turned to ways to end the violence and stabilise the situation. Indonesia came under strong international pressure to re-establish order. Martial law was declared on 7 September, but it surprised no one that TNI was unable or unwilling to bring the militia under control. Some kind of international intervention seemed to be needed. It was evident that it would take too long to assemble and deploy the full-scale UN PKF which had been envisaged for Phase Three. Some form of interim force was needed to take control in East Timor until a UN force could be despatched. On Sunday 5 September, before any discussion of the possibility with Defence, Mr Downer publicly canvassed the possibility that Australia might lead a coalition of the willing to restore order in East Timor. The next day, on Monday 6 September UNSG Annan asked Mr Howard whether Australia would be willing to lead a multinational force to restore order.

This was not a task for which Australia had specifically prepared. No previous consideration had been given to the possibility that Australia might find itself the leader of, and principle contributor to, a force to restore security in the kinds of circumstances we now faced—in part at least because earlier assessments suggested that the task would have been beyond Australia's capabilities. It is hard now to reconstruct exactly how and when the key decision was nonetheless taken to accept this responsibility. The principal forum for discussion and decision-making throughout the crisis was the NSC, which included six senior ministers, advised by CDF and senior civilian officials. The NSC met daily during this period, often for quite long periods, often without a clearly set agenda and often leading to no very clear conclusions. However in NSC discussions on 7 September, Ministers did agree on four clear conditions that would need to be satisfied for the operation that became known as INTERFET to proceed:

1. Indonesian agreement;

2. Clear UN Security Council mandate providing Chapter 7 authority to use 'all necessary means';
3. Substantial active support from regional countries, especially major ASEAN members; and
4. Support from the United States.

With the momentum of international and domestic pressure, it became evident that if these four conditions were satisfied, INTERFET would be mounted.

For a while it seemed that the first condition was unlikely to be satisfied. Initially Habibie rejected the idea of international intervention. But international pressure mounted throughout the week. A Security Council delegation visited Jakarta and Dili from 8-12 September, and there was a full scale UN Security Council debate on 11 September. At the same time the annual APEC summit, being held in Auckland provided a forum for pressure to be applied to Indonesia. On 12 September Habibie agreed to intervention.

APEC also provided an opportunity to address conditions three and four. It was considered important that any coalition have strong ASEAN representation, to make it clear that Australia was not out of step with the region in mounting INTERFET. Following head of Government level agreements reached in Auckland, the VCDF was despatched to secure and confirm contributions from regional partners.

US support was considered important for several reasons. At the practical level we needed help with things like airlift. Strategically, US support would send a message to TNI that any attempt to oppose INTERFET would meet an overwhelming response. But the United States was unwilling to undertake a major military commitment on the ground: operations in the Balkans, including in Kosovo where major air operations had been undertaken a few months earlier, had led to major concerns about the high operational tempo of US forces, and even small additional commitments were regarded in Washington as politically untenable. However combat forces were not what we wanted from the United States, and agreement on the size and shape of a US contribution was easily reached.

Finally, on Wednesday 15 September, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1264 asking Australia to mount and lead INTERFET, and providing Chapter 7 authorisation to use 'all necessary means' to restore peace and stability. Ministers also received assurance that the UN would move as fast as possible to re-establish the UN's mission in East Timor and deploy a PKF to take over from the Australian-led force.

Meanwhile Defence had been giving attention to the actual mounting of the operation. When the proposal to launch and lead an intervention was first raised on 5 September, it was clear that the ADF had two important assets in hand. The first was the forces prepared and pre-deployed for Op Spitfire, which constituted a robust foundation for the forces needed for INTERFET. The second was the planning that had been done for the Phase Three PKF, which could be used as a starting point for the INTERFET plan.

Ministers largely left it to ADHQ to develop the military plans and negotiate the composition of the coalition forces. The details of that process go beyond this brief study. Three issues do however warrant attention. First, shortly before the first elements of INTERFET deployed to East Timor on 20 September, the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF) provided the NSC with a formal presentation of his military appreciation, which included a frank discussion of some of the risks involved. He focused especially on the risks that Australian forces in INTERFET might be drawn into conflict with Indonesian forces in East Timor, or that TNI might seek to retaliate for Australian action there by mounting attacks elsewhere. These were real risks at the time and responsible planning needed to encompass them. Second, steps were taken to ensure that if fighting occurred and escalated, air and naval assets and additional land forces would be available under Australian national command to supplement the forces committed to INTERFET. Third, the Government decided to plan against the possibility that the UN would be unable to take over from INTERFET for a year. Steps were therefore taken soon after deployment began to raise an additional two battalions and some other forces to ensure that the Australian contribution could be sustained.

Once the operation got underway, and because it went well, there was relatively few genuinely strategic decisions to be taken once the force deployed. An interdepartmental task force was set up in PM&C on 17 September to coordinate policy towards East Timor, but by then most of the key decisions had been taken. The most important strategic issue that arose for Ministers as the operation unfolded was the very negative way in which INTERFET was presented in the press in Indonesia. There emerged a certain tension between projecting a positive image of INTERFET in Australia, and minimising offence to Indonesian sensibilities. I suppose no one would be surprised that under the circumstances, priority was given to the former consideration, but the cost in long-term distrust in Indonesia has been high.¹⁶

Happily, INTERFET did not need to last very long. The UN mounted an impressive effort, and INTERFET was able to begin the hand over to the

¹⁶ Hugh White, 'The New Australia-Indonesia Strategic Relationship – A Note of Caution', in John Monfries (ed.), *Different Societies, Shared Futures: Australia, Indonesia and the Region* (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2006), pp. 41-53.

UNTAET (United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor) PKF in February 2000. Australia maintained a strong contribution to UNTAET, and commenced a major effort to support the transition to independence. A significant but declining ADF presence was maintained in East Timor over the next few years, until in May 2006 unrest in Dili prompted a new deployment which seems likely to remain there for a long time to come. This deployment raises a whole new set of question about the quality of Australian strategic decision-making, but these are beyond the scope of this study.

Conclusion: Success, Failure and Responsibility

Any assessment of Australian strategic decision making in 1999 has to start with this curious fact: the outcome that was hailed as a triumph in December differed in every respect from the Government's objectives at the start of the year. By the end of the year East Timor was on the path to independence, our relationship with Indonesia was severely strained, the Defence relationship with TNI had been largely dismantled, and substantial ADF forces were committed to East Timor (as we can now see) more or less indefinitely. Australia's policy towards East Timor in 1999 can therefore fairly be called an operational success but a strategic failure.

The longer-term judgement of history will depend on outcomes which are still unclear. If East Timor proves to be a viable country and a reasonable neighbour, with stable internal politics and responsible international relationships, then Australia's original concerns about the threats to regional stability posed by a non-viable East Timor will have proved unfounded. It is too early to say, but East Timor's first five years of independence have gone some way to vindicate the concerns of those who believed that an independent East Timor was not a viable state. Likewise if Australia's relationships with Indonesia can hold to a slow but positive path of recovery from the suspicions of recent years, then our concerns about the long-term damage to our relations with Indonesia will not materialise. But again, though some signs are positive, it is too early to say.

Among Australian commentators, views of Canberra's performance in 1999 tend to fall into two camps. On the one hand, the Howard Government and its supporters see Australia having taken a morally principled decision to liberate East Timor, and managed a strategically adroit campaign to bring that about, so entitling Australia to claim a large share of the credit for East Timor's independence. The Government's detractors on the other hand argue that Canberra wilfully ignored the clear and growing threat of militia and TNI violence against the East Timorese in order to placate or appease Jakarta, and thus bears a heavy responsibility for the tragedies of September 1999.

The account offered here supports neither of these sets of views. On the one hand, this account does not sustain the view that East Timor's independence marks a triumph of Australian policy. As we have seen, the final outcome was in every respect the opposite of what was intended. And at every step along the way, very little of what transpired in 1999 was shaped in ways intended by the Australian government: After the delivery of Howard's letter to Habibie, Canberra was simply responding to events driven from elsewhere. After Habibie's decision to allow East Timor a vote on independence, Australia found itself a mostly powerless observer of events in which it had important interests but little capacity to influence. From a strategic policy perspective, it lost the initiative and never regained it, right up to the decision to deploy INTERFET. Even that decision was to a significant extent out of the government's hands: the violence that followed the ballot had so galvanised Australian public opinion that by the time the decision was made the government seemed to feel that it simply had no choice, whatever the costs and risks.

On the other hand this account does nothing to support the claims that Australia was indifferent to, let alone complicit in, TNI's malign role in the events of 1999. The Government did believe that TNI was an important factor in Indonesia's future and that connections with TNI could not be lightly discarded. Moreover the ill-judged comments by Downer concerning the nature of TNI's involvement with the militias certainly gave the impression that Canberra either misunderstood TNI's role, or was willing to mislead the public about it. But this mistaken impression was not held within Government and did not shape policy, and concern about relations with TNI did not prevent Canberra recognising the scale of threat that TNI posed to security in East Timor in 1999.

This does not however absolve Canberra of all responsibility in the disasters that befell East Timor after the ballot. I have argued here that Australia did less than it could have done to secure the deployment of a full-scale PKF to East Timor under UNAMET to provide security before during and immediately after the ballot. It is far from certain that anything that Australia could have done would have made a difference in the face of determined opposition from TNI, but there remains a clear possibility that it might have done, and I would say we were remiss in not trying to do more.

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