
Making East Timor Work: The United States as Junior Partner

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MANY IN WASHINGTON HAVE ALREADY DECLARED THE peace operation in East Timor a success story. Secretary of State Colin Powell has held up the operation as representative of a “model” that is “very, very deserving of our support.”¹ Senators from across the political spectrum have argued “we got it about right,” and have identified East Timor as “a promising recipe for U.S. engagement in the world today.”²

While the peace operation has gone relatively smoothly thus far, what U.S. policy makers really like about the East Timor “model” is that the United States did not have to take the lead. Australia led a 31-country intervention force to restore order in 1999 after violence followed a referendum on independence. The ongoing UN operation has succeeded in further stabilizing the territory and given the East Timorese a fighting chance to build a new country.

The United States has a number of important interests at stake in East Timor. A failure would adversely affect stability in neighboring Indonesia, an area through which over 40 percent of the world’s shipping passes on a daily basis. Timor is also important to the United States because it is important to Australia, an ally that fought with us in every war of the last century. The United States also has an interest in seeing the United Nations succeed in its role as mid-wife of a new nation state. If the United Nations fails at this type of mission, more responsibility will be left to the United States in similar situations in the future. Furthermore, Washington has a stake in reinforcing international legal principles, many of which

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© *National Security Studies Quarterly* Volume VII, Issue 3 (Summer 2001).

were violated by Indonesia's 1975 invasion and subsequent atrocities.

As much as everyone in Washington wants the East Timor "model" to succeed, however, many imposing challenges remain. For the international community to claim a clear success—and pull out without endangering what has been accomplished thus far—it needs to help develop local capacity in four key areas essential to a viable, self-sustaining country: security; social and economic well-being; justice/reconciliation; and governance.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

On the security front, international forces have driven out violent pro-Indonesian militias, established a stable border with the neighboring province of West Timor, and restored general law and order throughout most of the territory. However, somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 refugees remain in West Timor, many in camps controlled by violent integrationist militias. Closing the camps, repatriating refugees who desire to return home, demobilizing and reintegrating ex-combatants, and establishing a credible East Timorese Defense Force are critical tasks. Developments in Indonesia, and in the Indonesia-East Timor relation-

ship, will also dramatically affect the security environment for the new country as well.

East Timor's social and economic development remains a question of potential. Never a wealthy place, it suffers from extremely high infant mortality and illiteracy rates. Moreover, some 75 percent of its physical infrastructure has been destroyed by retreating militias and Indonesian soldiers.³ Social institutions were obliterated both by the deaths and forced displacement of large numbers of Timorese, as well as by the withdrawal of Indonesian and pro-Indonesian civil servants who held virtually all the senior positions in schools, clinics, and government offices. The shortage of local Timorese with education and management expertise is perhaps the largest impediment to building their new country. The government also faces huge budgetary shortfalls due to the loss of over \$100 million in annual Indonesian subsidies.

Against this bleak economic backdrop, Timor's bright spot is the prospect of significant oil and natural gas revenues from the Timor Gap. Under the terms of a recently completed agreement with Australia, East Timor stands to net up to \$3.6 billion over 20 years. While significant, these revenues are not

guaranteed, and East Timor faces an estimated fiscal gap of approximately \$200 million before these revenues are realized approximately four years from now. Furthermore, while the Timor Gap deal gives East Timor a potentially viable future, turning oil and natural gas revenues into a sustainable, balanced economy is an imposing challenge. Lacking an established institutional environment that could help ensure that oil and gas wealth is not squandered, East Timor will have to build strong governing structures to avoid the corruption that has plagued countries in similar circumstances.

Combating corruption is only one aspect of the fundamental challenge of establishing the rule of law in East Timor. While the advent of newly trained traffic police at key intersections in downtown Dili and columns of police recruits training in the streets are welcome signs of an incipient regime of law and order, the country-to-be lacks a court system, judges, legal codes, penal institutions, and other basic elements of a functional legal system.

Yet another fundamental problem is coming to terms with crimes committed during Indonesian rule, including accountability for the mass killings in 1999. Responsibility for these matters currently rests

in the hands of the Indonesian legal system, which thus far has failed to bring killers to justice. Militia members live in Jakarta with impunity, and admitted killers receive only a slap on the wrist in Indonesian courts. Indonesia's internal instability further decreases the prospect of the government following through on its pledges of justice.

The absence of an effective legal system in East Timor makes reconciliation efforts even more crucial. Slowly but surely, progress is being made on this front. In May 2001, church leaders sponsored the first reconciliation meeting with pro-integrationist Timorese to take place on Timorese soil. Additional efforts of this type will be necessary if Timorese are to achieve a workable reconciliation. Indeed, establishing a balance between justice and reconciliation is key, as without justice for some of the most egregious violators of human rights, many victims will remain unwilling to reconcile with others.

In December the United Nations will hand off responsibility for governing East Timor to a new independent government. East Timor will need leadership of significant stature to help steer the new country through the many turbulent waters ahead. Interestingly, Xanana Gusmao, the leader of the resistance

during the Indonesian occupation, has repeatedly declared that he is not standing for president. This could pose significant problems for the new country, as “Maung Bot,” or Big Brother as Gusmao is affectionately called in Tetun, may be one of the only figures with the power and credibility to unify Timorese around a common vision.

The U.S. Contribution: Learning to be an Effective Junior Partner

East Timor will not be the last case where the United States finds its interests served by ensuring that an intervention led by a friend or ally succeeds. Evaluating the significant but limited role the United States has played in East Timor provides insight into how the United States can maximize its leverage and impact on missions where it chooses to be a junior partner.

Military Support. Four types of U.S. military engagement were important to the success achieved thus far in East Timor and should be considered for similar operations in the future. First, the United States made significant contributions in logistics, intelligence, and other support functions through the U.S. Support Group East Timor (USGET), a task force set up expressly to fill critical needs during both the Aus-

tralian-led and UN-led phases of the operation. Some form of similar support arrangement will be necessary as long as friends and allies maintain significant forces on the ground.

Second, the United States has shown the American flag on the arms of U.S. military personnel who came ashore to perform civil affairs functions. These visits bolster friends on the ground, and even more importantly send a strong signal to the local population. The abilities and discipline of U.S. troops are lost on no one. Sergio Viera De Mello, the UN Administrator of East Timor, has praised the U.S. military task force for its “vital symbolic and humanitarian role” while Gary Gray, the senior U.S. representative in East Timor has noted that “people talk about the Marines for weeks” after their short visits to build schools and health posts.⁴

Third, a retired U.S. general has worked with the Timorese military leadership to establish the East Timor Defense Force, helping with everything from the design of a concept of operations for the new force, to writing training, human resources, and logistics plans. This type of support is easy, very valuable, and should be considered in other circumstances as well.

Fourth, three Americans are serving as UN Military Observers, realizing huge returns on a minimal investment. The American Chief of Operations' high visibility and extreme competence running a network of multinational observers throughout the country not only enhances U.S. prestige, it dramatically improves the chances for the mission's success. As much as many Americans would like it to be otherwise, however, U.S. commitment is also measured by the number of "boots on the ground." Providing only three soldiers to a force of over 8,000 verges on a vote of no confidence. In the future, the U.S. should consider modest double-digit contributions to select UN forces as a way of improving mission capabilities and overall confidence in the enterprise.

Political and Diplomatic Support. Where the United States plays the role of junior partner, political and diplomatic support is crucial. In the case of East Timor, the United States not only led the charge in the UN Security Council and pressured Indonesia to accept a multinational force, it also helped Australia assemble and field the multinational coalition.

This initial investment, however, has not been matched on the ground

in East Timor. Even as East Timor moves quickly toward independence, U.S. diplomatic and political presence in East Timor is minimal. No U.S. flag flies in East Timor, and the United States is represented by a mid-level officer who works for the U.S. Ambassador in Indonesia. This arrangement not only rankles many Timorese, it also allows U.S. interests in Timor to be skewed by Indonesian interests. Although in recent years inadequate funding of the State Department has led to many embassy closures worldwide, in those instances where the United States deems its interests sufficiently at stake to engage military and political assets, it must also be prepared to follow on with a commensurate diplomatic presence on the ground.

Transitional Economic and Social Support. Little known to most, a U.S. ambassador seconded to the UN Transitional Authority in East Timor negotiated East Timor's rights to the Timor Gap oil and gas deposits. Given the distinct asymmetry of the negotiations between Australia and the struggling territory, employing a hard-nosed U.S. ambassador to conduct the negotiations on behalf of East Timor proved to be a wise strategy. This creative use of diplomatic person-

nel should continue in the future.

According both to Timorese and to other donors, the United States has also made a substantive contribution to the economic and social needs of East Timor through assistance provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) Office of Transition Initiatives. This flexible, fast assistance—for everything from temporary employment programs to work with political groups and the media—has addressed needs that other donors could not. Policy makers in Washington should explore options for enhancing this and other flexible, civilian, rapid response capabilities.

The United States could also play a bigger role in promoting private sector involvement in post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Even in East Timor, with the prospect of developing a reasonably robust economy, there has been little interest from the private sector in long-term investments. Instead, lacking mechanisms to mitigate risk in post-conflict countries, the U.S. government has stood by while business contracts go to buccaneer capitalists who do little to enhance the long-term prospects of the country. The U.S. government needs to find a way to assist U.S. businesses by dampening the risks of early entry into markets such as East Timor's.

This would be good for U.S. economic interests as well as for the target country's stability.

Support for Justice and Reconciliation. The United States can and should use its leverage directly with the Indonesian government to advance the cause of justice and reconciliation in East Timor. Sustained U.S. involvement can help ensure that Indonesia's domestic tribunal delivers results, holding high-level militia leaders such as Euricco Guterres accountable. If it does not deliver, the United States should support Timorese calls for an international mechanism. East Timor will only begin to move forward if justice is served on those responsible for ordering and carrying out atrocities. The United States should also continue to fund reconciliation efforts between East and West Timor, and play a leadership role on central issues like police reform and training.

Support for Democracy and Governance. Various U.S. entities have taken a lead in supporting the development of a democratic system in East Timor. USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives has been instrumental in supporting civic education to prepare Timorese for their independence. Similarly, the

International Republican Institute has played an important role in helping to develop political parties. While many international actors can support democracy and governance activities, the United States has a comparative advantage due to its own history and extensive experience in this field.

Accountability is necessary not only in politics and economics, but in the foreign assistance business as well. One of the biggest problems in a large, complex operation like East Timor is the lack of sufficient planning and coordination among the countless local, non-governmental, and international actors on the ground. This inevitably leads to overlap, inefficiencies, and possible corruption. All such operations need some sort of watchdog, governmental or non-governmental, to keep local officials and the international community honest. In the case of East Timor, a joint local/international non-governmental organization called Lao Hammutuk serves this function by publishing a regular newsletter monitoring the activities of the international community and pointing out failures of common sense. While the United States does not provide funding to Lao Hammutuk, it should seek opportunities to support watchdogs, both inside and outside govern-

ment, to reduce corruption and encourage donors to respond to local needs.

A NEW FORM OF LEADERSHIP

Far from a derogatory title, “junior partner” status can serve the United States well when others are willing and able to take the lead. In East Timor, the United States has made significant but limited contributions in a number of key areas. At the same time, if U.S. experience in East Timor is to become a new “promising recipe for U.S. engagement,” U.S. policy makers will have to hone their approach. Deferring to others will continue to be an appropriate response in some cases, but only if the intervention in East Timor succeeds on the ground will it truly be a model. Policy makers, therefore, need to develop and refine the policies and policy instruments necessary for decisive and positive outcomes.

ENDNOTES

1. Secretary of State Colin Powell, speaking before the Commerce, Justice, State and the Judiciary Subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee, 3 May 2001, The Federal News Service, 3 May 2001. According to Powell, the

“model” consists of four essential elements: 1) withholding the provision of U.S. troops if there are other troops available; 2) providing political and diplomatic support; 3) providing funding; and 4) defining a clear endpoint to the operation.

2. Statements by Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) on the floor of the U.S. Senate, 12 April 2000; and Senator Russell Feingold (D-WI) on the floor of the U.S. Senate, 28 May 2000.
3. World Bank, *Report of the Joint Assessment Mission*, 12 August 1999, 1. This damage affected housing, schools, clinics, government buildings, and even many churches.
4. Viera De Mello made his comments at a 14 March 2001 USGET change of command ceremony in Dili. Gray made his observation to the author in an interview in Dili on 22 May 2001.