

Australia's East Timor Experience: Military Lessons and Security Dilemmas

James Cotton

In many respects, the decision of the Australian government first to volunteer forces for an international intervention in East Timor and then to assume the role of lead nation in a United Nations sanctioned 'coalition of the willing' was in sharp contrast to past Australian policy on the territory and also to its previous approach to regional diplomacy (Cotton 2001a). For twenty years successive Australian governments had been uncritical supporters of the Indonesian policy of 'integration', and good bilateral relations with Jakarta were regarded as essential to the nation's security. In the early 1990s, even at a time when (as a result of the killings at the Santa Cruz cemetery in 1991) outside of Southeast Asia Indonesia was widely condemned for its handling of the East Timor issue, Australia's military cooperation with Indonesia developed and deepened. Despite the presence of a vociferous East Timor lobby, until 1997 the major political parties were in agreement that East Timor was off the foreign policy agenda.

The reasons for the change of policy in 1998-99 are many (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2001). The August ballot in East Timor, in the conduct of which Australian personnel and funding were prominent, was administered by the United Nations. In any circumstances Australia's commitment to the UN, reflected in its participation in peacekeeping operations in Somalia, Cambodia and elsewhere, would have inclined policy makers to have supported an outcome consistent with the result of the ballot. Where the UN and its staff appeared to be the target of a planned campaign of harassment, and in a situation where the human rights of the population were being systematically abused and a humanitarian crisis loomed, public sentiment in favour of direct action could not be denied. Nevertheless, formal Indonesian assent was a necessary requirement, and this was granted undoubtedly because of Indonesia's dependence at the time upon international financial assistance. A 'regional' solution might have been preferred but was never a real prospect. There was also undoubtedly a less altruistic domestic element to the Timor decision, the government in power deriving electoral advantage from pursuing a course of action distinct from the 'engagement' approach of its predecessor. It remains a matter of dispute, however, the extent to which this last factor influenced key policy makers (Cotton 2002).

The East Timor experience has had a powerful impact on Australian regional policy, on military doctrine and on the national security outlook. Australia's role as a major source of funding and support for the new East Timor Defence Force entails a continuing commitment to

East Timor, including to the new nation's domestic security and economic development. This essay will concentrate specifically upon the military and security aspects of the commitment.

Australian experience with peacekeeping in East Timor can be considered under three broad categories – leadership of the multi-national INTERFET (International Force East Timor) mission, managing the transition to the PKF (peacekeeping force) role of UNTAET (United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor), and participating as a major partner in UNTAET.

Most attention will be focussed here on INTERFET, given Australia's role as the lead nation in the international coalition.

The INTERFET formula depended upon the existence of a lead nation, not excessively constrained by the political requirement to involve many other partners in order to guarantee the overall legitimacy of the mission.

When the UN Security Council on 15 September 1999 authorised (in Resolution 1296/1999) the establishment of a multinational force to restore peace and security in East Timor, there was no agreement on its national leadership. For practical and political reasons – relating to political will as well as to the availability of troops and supplies – Australia assumed that leadership.

Almost all military campaigns of any consequence conducted in the 20th century have been coalition operations, and with the rise of the doctrine of intervention since the end of the Cold War, the inevitability of coalition operations has become almost an axiom in planning for the use of military force. But the assembling of the INTERFET coalition was not an easy task and underlines the limited and even contradictory commitment to intervention that is characteristic of contemporary global politics (Cronin 1994). It may be assumed that all intervention coalitions will be intended to build peace and security in a disordered environment. The actual operations of the forces involved will, however, be conducted under political restraints the most important of which – aside from the avoidance of a more general conflict – will be to take no steps that would threaten the cohesion of the coalition. And all contributing parties will still be guided by their own distinct national interests which can be expected to outweigh the requirements of the local coalition commander.

All these potential limitations were in evidence in the record of INTERFET. Once the Indonesian government had signalled its willingness to accept an international force in East Timor, it was apparent that the incorporation of significant regional representation would serve to assuage Indonesian concerns and facilitate cooperation with the TNI (*Tentara Nasional*

Indonesia). The Australian and the Thai governments were especially active in soliciting contributions for the force. It should be recalled that at this point it was not clear whether the East Timorese 'militias' would offer resistance to the intervention or even indeed whether TNI regular troops, who numbered in the theatre around 15,000, would assist or oppose the operation. The latter possibility was not a remote contingency. By that time Jakarta had appointed a martial law commander who was endeavouring to replace the existing contingents with Kostrad personnel whose loyalty, as he candidly explained to Australian military liaison officers, could be relied upon.

At the forefront of the regional commitment were the Thais, who in providing troops that had recently been on exercises with Australian forces greatly facilitated the common INTERFET effort (Ryan 2000b, 45-54). However in negotiations with Australia it was made explicit that the Thai commitment would only be possible if its expenses could be defrayed, and would be constrained by the importance of maintaining bilateral relations with Indonesia. The Philippine government was motivated by similar concerns, and the non-combatant status of the engineering and medical units ultimately dispatched to INTERFET was underlined by their official designation as a 'Humanitarian Task Force'.

The early decision by the Republic of Korea to offer a battalion size force was helpful in building the political momentum of the coalition. Given their numbers and their capacity to operate independently, the Koreans were capable of providing security for a significant stretch of territory, but as the government in Seoul evidently did not wish to see any casualties they were assigned a specific area of operations in the eastern-most part of East Timor. The least helpful contribution was made by Malaysia. After initially announcing a major commitment, Kuala Lumpur contributed some 30 staff officers, commanded by a Brigadier-General. They were competent and professional soldiers who enjoyed cordial relations with the remainder of the international force, but their activities were undermined by remarks by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir, who alleged that the intervention was part of an Australian strategy to weaken and divide Indonesia. Beyond the immediate region, contributions to the INTERFET force were made by France, Italy, Canada, Jordan, Kenya and the United Kingdom, as well as by New Zealand. The US role in providing logistics and intelligence though low profile was vital (Dee 2001; Ryan 2000a).

In distributing his forces, therefore, the commander was constrained by political and diplomatic sensitivities. The 'lead nation' model, however, did place at his disposal a sufficient number of reliable forces to secure the main military objectives. Overall, the effect was to restrict the deployment of forces into the border theatre to Australian, New Zealand and UK units who then were required to deal with militia infiltrations and the prospect of death or injury.

At that stage contained by constitutional and legal requirements, Japan facilitated the launch of INTERFET by providing a fund of US\$100 million especially to assist in meeting the expenses of less-developed coalition members. Potential INTERFET partners were also reassured by a statement by the Australian Prime Minister that the costs of contributing nations would be covered and initial logistics support would, wherever possible, be provided. While the force numbers mandated by the UN were raised, and INTERFET ultimately received offers of infantry in excess of its eventual needs, some specialist units remained in short supply, and some national contingents were present as much for diplomatic objectives as for operational requirements.

Despite all of the above constraints, INTERFET force cohesion was maintained and its principal goal of restoring security in the territory was achieved. But as the coalition was not really tested by actual combat, it cannot be presumed that in a more exacting and hostile environment (as for example became the case in Somalia) it would have functioned so effectively.

The UN mandate specified a 'unified command structure', possibly with the precedent of the intervention in Haiti in mind (Ryan 2000b, 34-66). In practice, Australia reassembled its DJFHQ (Deployable Joint Force Head Quarters) in Dili which then controlled the operation. Liaison with other national force components was maintained not by the presence of their representatives at that HQ but in a somewhat ad hoc but nevertheless effective fashion involving personal contacts, frequent joint briefings and visits by Maj Gen Cosgrove to other contingents. Again in more adverse circumstances these command procedures may not have worked so well, with Australia perhaps facing diplomatic pressure to avoid casualties or limit specific deployments. As it was, there many stories in the Indonesian mass media which were to an extent retailed in other parts of Southeast Asia detailing alleged Australian arrogance, aggression and brutality. Any actual fighting would have been sure to have elicited heightened criticism that would have had a powerful domestic political impact.

INTERFET's relative success can be attributed to the rapid insertion of overwhelming force in a context where the political ground had been very carefully prepared.

In late 1998 the Australian military had conducted (with UK, US, Canadian and New Zealand participation) an exercise at DJFHQ, 'Exercise Rainbow Serpent', that simulated a peace enforcement exercise in a regional country (Breen 2000, 3). However, prior to the August 1999 ballot, while there were steps taken in Australia to raise force readiness there were no specific plans for an operation of the size and character of INTERFET. Two

scenarios were given extended consideration. Military planners had been directed to prepare either for participation in an international force that, it was assumed, would progressively take charge of security in the territory following Indonesia's abandonment of its claims, or for the requirement to evacuate international personnel if order broke down suddenly and irretrievably (Australian National Audit Office 2002, 27-30). In retrospect, and given what was known about conditions in East Timor and especially about the 'militias', failure to plan for peacekeeping was a significant oversight on the part of the Australian government (Cotton 2001b).

In the event, the INTERFET plan of action had its origins in the latter scenario, 'Operation Spitfire', which was altered to add more combat power and a greatly strengthened logistics component and became 'Operation Warden'. Evacuation required the rapid seizure and securing of appropriate landing sites and port facilities to which international personnel would then be transported either by helicopter, by wheeled vehicles or by small ships. As there could be no safe assumptions regarding the security conditions in the territory, the force would have to be sufficiently numerous and well-armed to deal with any possible antagonist, including elements of the TNI (including even naval and air units).

This strategy was retained in the INTERFET operation, though with an important modification. Maj Gen Cosgrove flew to Dili one day ahead of the initial deployment to meet directly with his Indonesian counterpart, Maj Gen Kiki Syahnakri, to explain his intentions and arrange an orderly transfer of responsibilities. Upon advice from liaison officers already in Dili, he then abandoned the plan to insert the first contingents by helicopter as this tactic may have resulted in a hostile reaction from TNI forces guarding the Dili airport (Breen 2000, 23-29). The first special forces arrived by C-130 which left them initially exposed, but this manoeuvre was successful in building an atmosphere of cooperation, at least at the landing zone.

It should be recalled that even after Indonesia accepted the need for an intervention force, there were demands both that the force itself should be entirely drawn from the region, and that it should only be lightly armed. When Maj Gen Cosgrove made it plain that he would be arriving with armour and would be using the airfield even at night to permit a rapid build-up of forces, the magnitude of the reversal they had received must have dawned on many Indonesian officers. Even though Indonesia was relinquishing the territory it took two days of solid negotiation in New York before the Indonesian representatives would accept a status of forces agreement for East Timor.

There were some occasions, even after the first forces were successfully inserted, when INTERFET might yet have been threatened. Two Indonesian T-209 submarines were detected shadowing the INTERFET fleet and its anti-submarine capabilities had to be employed to protect the transport of supplies (amongst which fuel was crucial) and also personnel. At one point contact was lost with one of the vessels, and the possibility of an attack had to be considered. Only when the TNI naval command were contacted with credible information on the activity of the submarines were they withdrawn (Dickens 2001). Similarly some Indonesian military aircraft adopted potentially hostile tactics.

Once the initial landing sites were secured and the capital subject to intensive patrolling to deal with any remaining militia members, the INTERFET command then pursued an 'oil spot' strategy (Ryan 2000b, 70; Bostock 2000). Baucau, East Timor's second city, was occupied to provide an alternative airport. The Western border region was secured by armour transferred by landing craft, forces were then inserted on the Southern coast region by air and sea, and finally the Oecussi enclave was occupied. At each stage a rapid build up of forces supported by air mobility prevented possible antagonists from taking the initiative while simultaneously delivering a powerful and positive message to the population that security had been established.

The conclusion drawn by Maj Gen Cosgrove and others was that 'high end capability' was an absolutely essential element in any intervention of this type. Without extensive anti-submarine capability, the Australian fighter force forward deployed and on standby, heavy armour in Darwin available for insertion, and the Aegis class cruiser USS Mobile Bay to provide battle space surveillance, the force may have lacked credibility and may even have invited opposition from adventurist elements. Maj Gen Cosgrove subsequently asserted that in operations of this kind the lesson to be learned was that whereas forces trained for combat could be extended to undertake peace enforcement and building tasks, the reverse was not possible. If lead nation coalitions are to recur in the future, they can only be successfully conducted if the command has at its disposal a full suite of capabilities (Cosgrove 2000).

Frequent and visible patrolling served to reassure the population, who then cooperated with the force to isolate and control the militias, such cooperation then building the foundations for the longer-term political objectives of the intervention.

Within four days of the initial landings, a full battalion of troops supported by armoured personnel vehicles had arrived in Dili by sea. Within six days extensive patrolling in force cleared the capital of militia members. The decision was taken to use armour as an integral part of the force, with 113 M113A1 APCs, and 29 ASLAV vehicles finally deployed (Bostock 2000).

The conventional wisdom in peacekeeping operations is to avoid, where possible, the use of armour in order to stay in direct contact with the population. The INTERFET forces found, however, that not only did their tracked vehicles give them mobility in the difficult terrain but that the militias were overawed and dispirited by the presence of armour.

Once initial security was established, larger patrols with full equipment were replaced by smaller (typically four person) units whose presence on the streets and in the villages quickly reassured the population. As the word spread that the militias had been vanquished, civilians began to return from hiding in the hills and bush. Any suspected militia members remaining in the vicinity of INTERFET forces were then quickly identified and detained.

In these operations the judgement of junior officers was crucial, and the resolution of problems greatly facilitated by the presence of language specialists amongst the INTERFET personnel.

At the tactical level, there were continuous consultations between INTERFET and the TNI, with Australian liaison officers attached to Maj Gen Kiki Syahnakri's command. Later, after a firefight on the western border the result of conflicting map information, a procedure was developed to defuse any possible border incidents. However the potential always existed for conflict and more serious incidents were narrowly avoided.

From the initial deployment, INTERFET forces were under orders to demand identification of any doubtful personnel using the roads. In an incident that might have erupted into a major firefight, with incalculable consequences, personnel manning an INTERFET check point in Dili prevented the passage of a large convoy of vehicles transporting elements of TNI territorial Battalion 745 en route to the border while their identity was established. The party was led by a group on motorcycles not dressed in uniform and carrying weapons. The convoy refused to respond to requests in *Bahasa Indonesia* for identification and through their night vision equipment the INTERFET personnel could see that weapons were being aimed directly at them (Breen 2000, 44-47). The decision was taken to allow the vehicles to pass, though some individuals in the convoy were clearly militia members. It has since been established that Battalion 745 was responsible for a number of murders and extensive looting as it made its way down the length of the territory and exited to West Timor (Christian Science Monitor 13 March 2000).

Until the TNI began to withdraw in large numbers there were many other incidents in which INTERFET forces were threatened by armed TNI and militia members travelling in trucks, and

there were also instances of TNI personnel in the streets discharging their weapons. TNI destruction and looting did not stop with the arrival of INTERFET, and when some members of the international force identified sites where, apparently, torture and murder had occurred, tensions between the forces grew. The steady discipline of the INTERFET force prevented any of these potential confrontations from descending into direct combat. The lesson was drawn that an intervention force must have not only precise rules of engagement but the strictest controls on behaviour.

At the earliest stage the INTERFET command decided, as a result of numerous requests, to transport a party of local and international journalists equipped with satellite communications to Dili. From the end of the first day, the conduct of INTERFET was therefore under the closest scrutiny. This was at a time when security was yet to be established, as the murder of one journalist and the detention of another demonstrated. Any violent incident was bound to be the subject of immediate media publicity and analysis. Decisions taken by junior officers and NCOs might well have an immediate effect, not merely upon the conduct of the operation but even on the coherence of the coalition itself. The importance of recognising the impact of the media was later stressed by Maj Gen Cosgrove himself:

In my day, as a junior leader, my decisions had an immediate impact on my troops and the enemy. In today's military operations the decisions of junior leaders still have those immediate impacts, but modern telecommunications can also magnify every incident, put every incident under a media microscope, and send descriptions and images of every incident instantly around the world for scores of experts and commentators to interpret for millions of viewers and listeners. Thus the decisions of junior leaders and the actions of their small teams can influence the course of international affairs. (Cosgrove 2000)

Once again the lesson appeared to be the need for clear and coherent rules of engagement and completely reliable discipline.

Operations against the Timorese 'militias' entailed the use not only of military capacity but also of powers of arrest and detention, functions that can only be discharged in cooperation with the civil power.

From the first day of deployment, INTERFET forces were confronted with civil tasks. One of the requirements of the UN mandate for the force was to provide assistance to UNAMET (United Nations Mission in East Timor), but as UNAMET was not empowered with any authority for the territory or population, and given the complete dissolution of the Indonesian

administration, government effectively did not exist in the territory. INTERFET forces detained suspected militia members but there were no gaols to hold them nor legal process to adjudicate their suspected crimes. Scenes of murder and torture were discovered, and in the tropical conditions forensic work had to be hurriedly undertaken in order to record the evidence. INTERFET's capability to perform these important tasks depended largely upon ad hoc arrangements. While FRETILIN was clearly the dominant political movement, there was no systematic attempt to organise a local administration. Fortunately the force rapidly established relations of trust and cooperation with the population, and many problems were overcome on the basis of good will. In more demanding circumstances, this vacuum of authority might well have proved a contentious issue. If there had been significant complaints regarding the conduct of the force in discharging these duties, the coherence of the coalition might have been placed under strain.

As security was established, INTERFET's civil role extended to what might be termed the exercise of information operations. The force had to develop a capacity to project the message to the population that they had the ability and authority to protect them and to deal with any future threats. Sending this message involved the use of leaflets, posters, radio broadcasts and other forms of communication. Within a month of arriving in the territory, INTERFET had published the first issue (in 3 languages) of a broadsheet newspaper, *New East Timor*, and distributed copies in every locality. In an environment where all basic services were absent and most infrastructure destroyed this was no easy task (Beasley 2002; Blaxland 2002). The importance of this work and the modest resources available to perform it led to the conclusion that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) lacked specialist civil-military operations capability, and that in any future coalition operations such capability was a major requirement.

Assuming the lead nation role stretched Australia's logistics capability to breaking point.

Part of the problem derived from the sheer volume of demands on the logistics train. Despite agreeing to provision their forces with basic necessities, some national contingents arrived with virtually no supplies. With the force composition still being determined as the first elements arrived in what was then regarded as a potentially hostile theatre, there was little time to shape or change plans.

In addition, Australian logistics had been designed to support Australian formations rather than to provision and support a multi-national force. Quite apart from their occasional needs for some specific items of equipment which were not of the Australian standard, these forces were to be reimbursed for part of their expenses, and thus required the Australian logisticians to account for the value of provisions supplied. It took some time to develop the techniques

necessary to perform this task (Australian National Audit Office 2002, 52-88).

Despite the difficulties of the theatre, some national contingents took these accounting requirements to extreme lengths. One contingent even claimed compensation from Australia for a shipment of supplies that was late arriving in their area of operations. The lesson to be drawn is for potential 'lead nations' to have their logistics systems appropriately equipped and to communicate to other coalition contingents their precise responsibilities.

Given that PKO operations cannot be launched speedily, there may well be further instances of these operations replacing multi-national missions. The Timor experience showed clearly that such transitions require the early identification of the Force Commander, and proper resourcing of a command headquarters, accompanied by appropriate planning and preparation. In the East Timor case there were significant problems in these areas.

As has been noted, the INTERFET HQ was, to all intents, an Australian command structure. UNTAET, including its security component, was authorised by the Security Council on 25 October 1999, but the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) devoted most of its energies to the formation of a civil authority for the territory, a priority understandable in light of the absence of government noted above. The UNTAET force commander was only appointed on 30 December and did not arrive in East Timor until 25 January 2000 (de los Santos 2001). In his absence INTERFET was forced to formulate a handover plan which began to be implemented when the eastern most sector of the territory was handed on to UN security authority on 1 February. While the force HQ was designed to be staffed by 200 personnel, only 75 had arrived by 23 February when the final elements of INTERFET were withdrawn, and many of the remaining positions were never filled. Those staff who were in post had had no experience of working together and lacked even basic equipment.

These problems of transition were exacerbated by the absence of clear lines of authority. A UN force commander is answerable to the SRSG (Special Representative of the Secretary-General) who is in overall command of the mission. In the East Timor case the initial force directive was supplied by the Under Secretary General, DPKO, and the SRSG did not promulgate a force directive specifically for the mission until 8 May (Smith 2002, 125-8).

Moreover the force commander did not stay long enough in the theatre to lay a strong foundation for the successful operation of the UNTAET military force. Fortunately at other levels the command structure proved sufficient resilient to cope. Here the Australian

deputy commander, who had spent part of 1999 at UN headquarters dealing with the Timor issue, played a major leadership role.

Other problems encountered showed that a force mix to reflect the diverse tasks entailed by complex peace operations (including air support, a maritime component, intelligence capabilities, and communications) is essential to their success.

The transition to full UNTAET responsibility for security was achieved on 23 February 2000. By that time the situation had stabilised to the extent that, beyond the western border, the actual security work required of the military forces was mostly routine. Contingents took the opportunity to perform useful community work (sometimes in collaboration with national NGOs) or undertake engineering and repairs to infrastructure. In mid-2000, however, a series of militia infiltrations tested defences on the central and southern borders, and two UNTAET peacekeepers were killed. Air assets contracted by UNTAET proved inadequate and the ADF transferred helicopters to East Timor to provide mobility and surveillance (though retaining direct Australian control over their use in operations). Though East Timor is an island nation UNTAET possessed no maritime force and thus was never able to interdict any hostile infiltrations by sea.

The UNTAET experience also demonstrated the problematic nature of intelligence in a multi-national context. While INTERFET was able to use Australian intelligence assets, UNTAET though it contained a Military Information cell did not devote sufficient resources to intelligence gathering or assessment (Smith 2002, 135). Neither did UNTAET pursue a sustained policy on information operations which could have helped counter militia infiltrations.

In peace operations an engineering capability is vital, and as its employment to restore infrastructure and communications is bound to have a powerful humanitarian, social and political impact, it should be adequately resourced and its management conducted in cooperation with the civilian elements of the mission.

The UNTAET engineering component was severely stretched. Some of the national engineering contingents while containing competent personnel were from nations where many restrictions existed on the use of equipment and the availability of supplies. Though the Australian engineering contribution to UNTAET was modest, Australian units performed well due to their more generous provisioning.

Finally the mission also demonstrated deficiencies in the UN system of logistics, supply and reimbursement.

Problems with UN logistics are not a new issue, and recommendations as to changes in the system are included in Lakhdar Brahimi's *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations* of August 2000 (Brahimi 2000). On the view of the first deputy force commander 'the current UN logistics system is unsatisfactory for the conduct of military operations, and more so those in a harsh environment over tenuous lines of communication. The current system lacks detailed planning and is too centralized, too slow, and not sufficiently responsive to the force commander's requirements (Smith 2002, 141). Specific problems in East Timor included the provision of inadequate aircraft, a major problem in the supply of rations which took six weeks to resolve, and a poorly maintained telecommunications system that forced military forces to use their own radio equipment.

On the question of UN reimbursement to national contingents, the Australian experience with UNTAET is instructive. UN reimbursements are based upon the personnel and equipment provided by the contributing nation as agreed with the UN. There are set rates for personnel and lease rates for equipment. It took some time for the UN DPKO to come to an agreement with Australian Defence officials regarding the types of equipment appropriate for the Australian contingent, and a final Memorandum of Understanding was not exchanged until August 2001. The sum to be reimbursed for Australian expenses is around one-fifth of the actual expenses as estimated by the Department of Defence. Even this reduced reimbursement has been slow to arrive, with payment of less than half of the agreed disbursement for the first year of deployment (to February 2001) arriving by October of that year (Australian National Audit Office 2002, 46-8).

The East Timor experience has been the subject of an intense domestic debate regarding the future directions of Australia defence. Even before September 11, it was argued that in the post-Cold War environment, military doctrine and training should reflect such new roles as peacekeeping and dealing with 'new generation' security issues such as trans-national crime and terrorism, as opposed to the old emphasis upon securing the defence of continental Australia.

The impact of the East Timor experience on the Australian security outlook has been significant. While it is held that Australian forces performed well during the crisis of 1999, especially given the immensely difficult logistics involved in inserting and supporting a multinational force (with no prior experience of working together) in a potentially hostile theatre, the commitment revealed a potential lack of capacity. As a result the 2000 defence White Paper committed the government to significant increases in expenditure over a ten-year period. Such expenditure increases were already expected, given the problem of block obsolescence in much defence equipment. What was unprecedented in the White Paper was the clear statement that,

after the defence of continental Australia, 'lower level operations', including peacekeeping, were the next most important priority for the ADF, and that other features of the East Timor experience might recur:

This might require the ADF to contribute to regional peacekeeping and humanitarian relief operations and help evacuate Australians and others from regional troublespots. We should be prepared to be the largest force contributor to such operations. Our planning needs to acknowledge that we could be called upon to undertake several operations simultaneously, as we are at present in East Timor, Bougainville and the Solomon Islands (Department of Defence 2000, 39).

This statement seems to anticipate several possible scenarios. The White Paper underlines the strategic primacy of Indonesia, and affirms that Australia's security would be threatened by 'adverse developments' inside Indonesia, whether internally or externally generated (Department of Defence 2000, 22). It should be recalled that this text was published before September 11 and the Bali bombing.

On East Timor, the White Paper signaled nothing less than a continuing security commitment:

Australia will seek to develop an effective defence relationship with [independent] East Timor . . . East Timor faces formidable security challenges. Our aim will be to provide, with others, an appropriate level of help and support for East Timor as it builds the capabilities and national institutions that it will need to ensure its security and thereby contribute to the security of its neighbourhood (Department of Defence 2000, 37).

A week before the document was released to the public, the Defence Minister announced a A\$26 million aid program to help train and equip an East Timorese defence force, the core of which was drawn from FALINTIL (*Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional Timor Leste*) (Australian, 24 November 2000). As this was the guerrilla resistance army that was for a generation the Indonesian military's most dogged opponents, this commitment might be seen to inject something of a potential irritant into future relations with Indonesia (presuming the continued domestic political importance of the TNI).

While some of the equipment and other shortcomings apparent as a result of INTERFET are being rectified, and Australian military doctrine now expressly anticipates participation in new

coalition operations in the region as a possibility for which there should be preparation, the shift to the focus on terrorism has diverted attention and resources from a thorough assimilation of the Timor experience.

Each of the three phases of the Timor experience posed, though to different degrees, the classic peacekeeper's dilemma of being required both to establish and maintain order while simultaneously laying the foundation for nation building, tasks that may come into conflict (Suhrke 2001).

Much has been written on the dimensions of this dilemma as reflected in the conduct of the UNTAET administration (Beauvais 2001; Chopra 2002; Gorjão 2002). But in the military and security fields it was also in evidence.

In the relatively brief INTERFET phase, restoring security was the most urgent priority and this goal could only be realised by the international force. There were neither warring parties nor an administrative structure in existence so the tasks to be accomplished were uncontroversial albeit difficult and INTERFET exercised the complete monopoly of force. Initially FALINTIL received the force as liberators, and discipline was maintained against acts of vigilantism against suspected militia members. INTERFET brought Xanana Gusmão to Dili and he made his first address to the population on 22 October. But INTERFET was required to disarm all combatants, and if its orders were to be taken literally, this included the resistance. When this became a possibility, there were several incidents only defused by tactful diplomacy. Eventually it was decided not to require FALINTIL to disarm provided the force remained in its cantonments, and some force leaders were also then employed as scouts and guides on the western border. FALINTIL was clearly to be the core of any future East Timorese defence force, and their previous role had made the ballot and political independence possible. But the failure or inability of the UN to deal with this issue necessitated in-theatre improvisation.

This problem became more acute during the tenure of UNTAET. Many FALINTIL members remained in their cantonments and discontent spread as promised supplies and international assistance failed to arrive. It was not until July 2000 that the UN administration tackled the problem, funding a study of security options that eventually led to the creation of an East Timor Defence Force and the recruitment of some FALINTIL veterans to fill its first battalion. It was fortunate for public order that, in general, FALINTIL members did not become more assertive in advancing their claims for recognition and compensation, given the support they might have enjoyed amongst the general population in the event of a clash with UNTAET military forces or police. The latter were the formal possessors of the exclusive right to exercise force, but the former were widely held to be the legitimate national combatants. Nevertheless some aberrant

FALINTIL factions were involved in disorder in various locations including in Baucau as well as in connection with the dissident CPD-RDTL (*Conselho Popular pela Defesa da República Democrática de Timor Leste* – Popular Council for the Defence of the Democratic Republic of East Timor) and post-independence veterans organizations remain a main focus of discontent with the Alkatiri government. And the formation of the defence force has itself become a source of political friction given the perception that its membership has been selected partly on the basis of political criteria.

Meanwhile, as has been noted, Australia has become involved as a major patron of the East Timor defence force and thereby may be drawn into domestic political disputes. It is conceivable that this force, relatively well provisioned and trained in an impoverished environment, may become political actors in some future crisis caused by government incapacity or failure. In East Timor, as in Cambodia and Kosovo, insufficient thought has been given to what foundations would be needed to maintain order and security at the conclusion of international intervention (Kondoch 2001; Caplan 2002).

Overall, Australian policy must be situated within the evident weakness of regional order and the indispensability of global political institutions (especially the United Nations) and global publics in sanctioning and legitimising the international intervention.

As is widely acknowledged in the international relations literature, the most important supra-national security actor in the region is ASEAN, though its precise status (whether security community or elite project) is disputed (Acharya 2001; Narine 2002). The ASEAN 'norms' of mutual respect for sovereignty, the right of states to be free of external coercion, a prohibition on intervention in the internal affairs of other states, the settlement of disputes by peaceful means and the renunciation of the threat of force have come to be enormously influential in institution building in the Asia-Pacific. Since the 1970s Australian foreign policy makers have accorded ASEAN major status as a security (and also as an economic) interlocutor.

The record of ASEAN's response to the East Timor issue, however, is indicative of the limitations of the regional security order. On any reading, Indonesia's annexation of East Timor involved the sustained use of aggressive force and the systematic violation of the human rights of the population of the territory. Indonesia had no title or claim to the territory and its invasion of 7 December 1975 was a blatant intervention in pursuit of conquest. Even if the independence declaration made in East Timor on 28 November 1975 is disregarded, then under international law and according to the United Nations the territory remained under Portuguese administrative authority pending an act of self-determination (Clark 1995). In addition, Indonesia's actions violated the intent of the one common instrument developed by ASEAN to build a distinctive

regional order, ZOPFAN (the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality). The East Timor venture led to Indonesia's military dependence upon the United States, the very further entanglement with foreign powers that the group ostensibly sought to reject. Yet aside from Singapore's abstention from voting in the UN General Assembly when the issue was initially debated, ASEAN solidarity in support of Jakarta's policy was never breached.

In the early 1990s, with Indonesian policy in the territory clearly a failure as was demonstrated by the Santa Cruz killings in 1991, many nations formerly supportive of or quiescent in Indonesia's role took a more critical approach. As a result of Congressional hearings, training of Indonesian officers in the US was suspended, the panel of major aid donor governments raised objections, and the UN tried anew to convene negotiations on the status of the territory between Lisbon and Jakarta. Not all nations followed this trend, with Australia and Japan helping to deflect criticism of Indonesia in UN human rights fora. Similarly, through the 1990s, the governments of Malaysia and the Philippines and also of Thailand acted to obstruct meetings convened by NGOs in their capitals on the East Timor question. This was the context for ASEAN's wholly inadequate response to the crisis of 1999 (Inbaraj 1995).

Now the reasons for the group's avoidance of this conflict, and indeed their steadfast support at the United Nations and elsewhere for the Indonesian position are clear enough, as indeed is Australia's similar behaviour in this period. But if, as some critics maintain, ASEAN's concern from 1979 with the Cambodia issue represented a partial undermining of the ASEAN norms, its complete lack of concern with East Timor until 12 September 1999 must be interpreted as an even greater denial.

There can be little doubt that the East Timor crisis of 1999 was Southeast Asia's greatest security challenge since Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, and in crafting means to deal with the crisis prominent figures in ASEAN called for a 'regional' solution that avoided intervention by external powers. Yet when confronted by the post-ballot bloodshed and the Indonesian government's clear inability or disinclination to discharge its obligations to the United Nations and the East Timorese to maintain order, ASEAN could find no mechanism through which to influence developments. As the APEC meeting in Auckland convened, ASEAN foreign ministers initially refused even to place the East Timor issue on the agenda. Once the UN had insisted on an international intervention and this intervention was accepted by the Habibie government, Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan was active, however, in encouraging contributions from the ASEAN nations to the intervention force. ASEAN nations did provide contingents, though under the limitations noted above.

There can be little doubt that the failure of regional security structures was a major

consideration in crafting the Australian response to the crisis. This failure has had an enduring legacy, with policy makers now more strongly inclined to seek security within existing bilateral treaty arrangements. Similarly the pre-eminent role of the United Nations in sanctioning intervention has been acknowledged and affirmed, though post-September 11 developments have introduced a tension between this role and the obligations of the US alliance.

Conclusions

By any standards the Australian military strategy pursued during the East Timor intervention was a success. Security was rapidly established, there were only a handful of casualties and most of these the result of accidents rather than exchanges of fire, and the East Timorese population did not sustain any collateral damage. In occupation the security force developed good relations with the population, and transferred its responsibilities successfully to UNTAET. Though the civil and political record of UNTAET was decidedly varied in its degree of success, popular dissatisfaction with its slow progress in some areas did not prejudice the security situation. The territory was able to undertake a ballot to chose a constituent assembly in almost completely peaceful circumstances. The UN has now begun handing on security duties to its local counterparts in a generally cooperative atmosphere.

Given the reservations on the part of many nations regarding the UN's possible responsibilities as an agency of intervention (as can be seen in criticisms of even the modest proposals made in the Brahimi Report) international coalition strategies of the future may well adapt the approach taken in East Timor. As Alan Ryan has argued, for such a coalition strategy to be successful, the lead nation must be able to exercise strong control, command and intelligence systems must be effective, and a degree of regional cooperation is essential for coalition legitimacy (Ryan 2002). None of these measures will be sufficient, however, without a common peace enforcement doctrine the evolution of which is currently on the global agenda (Thakur 2001). And Australia may well be more cautious in the future in participating in such coalitions, for though the East Timor exercise may be judged a success many perils were only narrowly avoided and the defence establishment was stretched to its limit to accomplish the task.

References

- Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia. ASEAN and the problem of regional order* (London: Routledge, 2001)
- The Australian* (Sydney)
- Australian National Audit Office, *Management of Australian Defence Force Deployments to East Timor* (Canberra: The Auditor-General Audit Report no. 38, 2002)
- Kent Beasley, *Information Operations during Operation Stabilise* (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Centre, Working paper No 120, August 2002)
- Joel C Beauvais, 'Benevolent Despotism: a critique of UN state-building in East Timor', *International Law and Politics* 33 (2001), no 4, 1101-1178
- John Blaxland, *Information-era manoeuvre The Australian-led Mission to East Timor* (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Centre, Working paper No 118, June 2002)
- Ian Bostock, 'East Timor: An Operational Evaluation. By the Book', *Jane's Defence Weekly* 3 May 2000, 23-27
- Lakhdar Brahimi, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations* <www.un.org/peace/reports/peace_operations/report.htm>, 21 August 2000.
- Bob Breen, *Mission Accomplished, East Timor: the ADF participation in INTERFET* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 2000)
- Richard Caplan, *A New Trusteeship? The International Administration of War-torn Territories* Adelphi Paper #341 (London: IISS/Oxford University Press, 2002)
- Jarat Chopra, 'Building State Failure in East Timor', *Development and Change* 33(2002), no 5, 979-1000
- The Christian Science Monitor, 'A Brutal Exit – Battalion 745', <www.csmonitor.com/atcsmonitor/specials/timor>, 13 March 2000
- Roger S Clark, 'The "decolonisation" of East Timor and the United Nations norms on self-determination and aggression', in Catholic Institute for International Relations and International Platform of Jurists for East Timor, *International Law and the Question of East Timor* (London: CIIR/IPJET, 1995), 65-102
- Peter J Cosgrove, 'The ANZAC Lecture at Georgetown University', 4 April 2000
- James Cotton, 'Against the Grain: The East Timor Intervention', *Survival* 43 (2001a), no 1, 127-42
- James Cotton, 'Australia's Commitment in East Timor: A Review Article', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23 (2001c), no 3, 552-68
- James Cotton, 'The East Timor commitment and its consequences', in James Cotton and John Ravenhill eds, *The National Interest in a Global Era: Australia in World Affairs 1996-2000*

(Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002), 213-34

Patrick M Cronin, 'Coalition Warfare Facts, Fads and Challenges', *Strategic Review* 22 (1994), no 2

Moreen Dee, "Coalitions of the Willing" and Humanitarian Intervention: Australia's Involvement with InterFET', *International Peacekeeping* 8 (2001) no. 3, 1-20

Jaime de los Santos and Arnulfo M B Burgos, *Restoring Hope. Peacekeeping the East Timor Experience* (Manila: A M Cleofe Prints, 2001)

Department of Defence, *Defence 2000 – Our Future Defence Force* (Canberra: defence Publishing Service, 2000)

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *East Timor in Transition 1998-2000. An Australian Policy Challenge* (Canberra: Brown and Wilton, 2001)

David Dickens, 'The United Nations in East Timor: Intervention at the Military Operational Level', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23 (2001), no 2, 213-32

Paulo Gorjão, 'The Legacy and Lessons of the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24 (2002), no 2, 313-336

Sonny Inbaraj, *East Timor. Blood and Tears in ASEAN* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 1995)

Boris Kondoch, 'The United Nations Administration of East Timor', *Journal of Conflict and Security Law* 6 (2001), no 2, 245-65

Shaun Narine, *Explaining ASEAN: regionalism in Southeast Asia* (Boulder: Rienner, 2002)

Alan Ryan, *From Desert Storm to East Timor. Australia, the Asia-Pacific and the 'New Age' Coalition Operations* (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Center, Study Paper No 302, 2000a)

Alan Ryan, *Primary Responsibilities and Primary Risks. ADF Participation in the International Force East Timor* (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Center, Study Paper No 304, 2000b)

Alan Ryan, 'The Strong Lead-nation Model in an ad hoc Coalition of the Willing: Operation Stabilise in East Timor', *International Peacekeeping* 9 (2002), no 1, 23-44

Michael G Smith with Moreen Dee, *Peacekeeping in East Timor. The Path to Independence* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner/International Peace Academy, 2003)

Astri Suhrke, 'Peacekeepers as Nation-Builders: Dilemmas of the UN in East Timor', *International Peacekeeping* 8 (2001), no 4, 1-20

Ramesh Thakur, 'Cambodia, East Timor and the Brahimi Report', *International Peacekeeping* 8 (2001) no. 3, 115-24.