
Playing Second Fiddle on the Road to INTERFET: Australia's East Timor Policy Throughout 1999

Iain Henry

Though other accounts have critiqued Australia's efforts to secure a peacekeeping force in East Timor—or have alleged that Australia attempted to prevent this outcome—this article explains why Australia was forced into a reactive policymaking posture, where the need to prioritise the most critical objectives limited possible response options. While Australia could have done more to secure a pre-ballot peacekeeping force, this would have entailed serious risks with low prospects of success. This article shows that Australia's need to prioritise its relationship with Indonesia constrained its ability to pursue other strategic goals—a reality that is unlikely to change.

On 27 January 1999 the Indonesian President, B. J. Habibie, announced that the status of East Timor—which had been invaded in 1975 and formally incorporated into Indonesia in 1976—would be determined through an act of self-determination. This decision generated extreme policy challenges for Australia: although its long-standing preference was for East Timor to remain part of Indonesia, it had little choice but to support Habibie's decision and work towards supporting a free and fair self-determination ballot.

Two authors have already examined this period of Australian policy-making, drawing very disparate conclusions. Hugh White, a former Defence Department official who was intimately involved in the events of 1999, has argued that Australia was “remiss in not trying to do more” to secure a pre-ballot peacekeeping force (PKF).¹ Clinton Fernandes, a former Australian Army intelligence analyst, presents a contrary view by claiming that the Australian Government “worked assiduously” to prevent a peacekeeping force.²

Rejecting both of these theses, this article presents an original perspective on the events of 1999 by examining the intent, substance and efficacy of Australia's strategic policy. While it draws on many publicly available sources, it also uses data obtained in interviews with 15 individuals

¹ H. White, 'The Road to INTERFET: Reflections on Australian Strategic Decisions Concerning East Timor, December 1998-September 1999', *Security Challenges*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Autumn 2008), p. 86.

² C. Fernandes, 'The Road to INTERFET: Bringing the Politics Back In', *Security Challenges*, vol. 4, no. 3 (Spring 2008), p. 83.

intimately involved in forming Australian policy. Undertaken in 2012, this interview series included former Prime Minister John Howard, former Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and the other four ministers that comprised the National Security Committee of Cabinet.³

This article argues that during 1999, Australia's strategic policy was almost constantly reactive—usually driven by a desire to protect the Australia-Indonesia relationship and avoid inflaming civil-military tensions in Jakarta. Developments in East Timor—particularly instances of militia violence—regularly placed the Australian Government in a difficult position, where the need to respond to such violence conflicted with Australia's long-term strategic concerns. In this context, Australia's primary challenge throughout 1999 was ensuring that strategic policy appropriately prioritised the two most important objectives—encouraging Indonesia's developing democracy and maintaining the Australia-Indonesia bilateral relationship. Based on this analysis, the article closes with some observations on Australia's ability to pursue and achieve its strategic objectives concerning Indonesia. While Australia failed to prevent violence in East Timor, it appropriately prioritised its most important objectives and avoided worst-case outcomes.

Why Consider 1999 as Separate from the Events of 1998?

Australia's East Timor policy throughout 1998 and 1999 can be separated into two discrete periods. The first, from mid-1998 until early 1999, culminated in a diplomatic initiative aimed at shifting responsibility for Indonesia's East Timor policy from Foreign Minister Ali Alatas to President Habibie and the Indonesian military. In December 1998 Howard wrote to Habibie, suggesting that despite Indonesia's mid-1998 offer of special autonomy for East Timor, international negotiations on East Timor's status were "not producing the desired results quickly enough".⁴ These international negotiations, known as the "Tripartite process", involved Indonesia, Portugal—as East Timor's former colonial power—and the United Nations (UN). East Timorese leaders were not directly involved, but their interests were represented by the UN official responsible for the talks, Jamsheed Marker.

This 'Howard Letter', which affirmed Australia's support for Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor, was intended to caution Jakarta that a fresh approach towards East Timor was required. Howard suggested that Habibie might consider granting wide-ranging autonomy for a lengthy interregnum period, which could conclude with an act of self-determination. According to Peter Varghese, then a senior official in the Department of Prime Minister

³ To provide alternate perspectives, senior public servants, a Ministerial adviser and a former military officer were also interviewed. Data obtained from these interviews was carefully assessed, particularly with regard to the possibility of *ex post facto* interpretations of history.

⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor in Transition 1998-2000: An Australian Policy Challenge* (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2001), p. 181.

and Cabinet (PM&C), it was hoped that this interregnum would maximise the prospect that “over time, the Timorese would be more comfortable with the idea of remaining part of Indonesia”.⁵ Senior Defence officials, though aware that a policy change on East Timor was under consideration, did not learn of the Howard Letter until after it was dispatched.

There has been significant debate about the intent of this letter, particularly since the end of the Howard Government in 2007. Although some commentators have since suggested that East Timorese independence was one of the Howard Government’s strategic objectives, the text of the letter—as well as supporting interview data from senior Australian Government officials—suggests that many decision-makers and officials hoped Habibie would adopt a strategy that maximised the prospects of Indonesian rule being accepted and legitimised. It is sufficient to say that the eventual outcome—an independent East Timor—was at no point a policy objective or preference for the Australian Government.⁶

The second period began with Habibie’s response to the Howard Letter—in January 1999 Habibie announced that Indonesia would provide an act of self-determination for East Timor. This decision prompted a significant shift in Australia’s foreign and strategic policy, whereby much of the effort moved to military contingency and diplomatic crisis planning focused on reducing the likelihood and consequences of militia violence. Following Habibie’s decision, from late-January 1999, Australia worked to mitigate the perils of the self-determination ballot. The pursuit of this strategic goal marked a new phase in the Australian Government’s approach to East Timor. Given that senior officials at the Department of Defence were not involved in the drafting of the Howard Letter, it was only at this point that Australia’s strategic policy adopted a truly ‘whole of government’ approach.

Studies that approach the East Timor issue by examining both of these periods usually argue that Australia failed to achieve its strategic objectives of 1998, and this is correct. However, given that Habibie’s decision in January 1999 necessitated a revision of Australia’s strategic policy and the implementation of whole of government approach, the second period is worthy of independent examination and assessment.

Indonesia’s *fait accompli* Forces Australia into a Reactive Posture

Despite Howard’s suggestion for a long-term approach, Habibie was inclined towards an expeditious solution and after internal consultation, in late January 1999 he announced that Indonesia would allow an act of self-

⁵ P. Varghese, interview with author, 2012.

⁶ For a detailed analysis of Australia’s diplomatic activity in 1998 and early 1999, see I. Henry, ‘Unintended Consequences—An Examination of Australia’s “Historic Policy Shift” on East Timor’, *The Australian Journal of International Affairs*, forthcoming.

determination for East Timor. This announcement stunned the Australian Government—throughout 1998, Australian diplomacy had been focused on supporting Indonesia’s democratic transition and strengthening the bilateral relationship. Although a successful act of self-determination might address the long-standing and problematic issue of East Timor, this decision posed serious risks for Australia’s most important objectives—protecting the bilateral relationship and supporting Indonesia’s ongoing democratic and civil-military reforms.

Interviewed in 2012, Howard and Downer agreed that Australia had little choice but to accept Habibie’s decision as a *fait accompli*.⁷ Given Australia’s priorities, once Habibie had made his decision in late January 1999, Australia’s new strategic objective was simple—“to see the ballot not just occur, but to see it occur credibly”.⁸ Australia now adopted a reactive policy-making posture—from January onwards, Australia’s strategic policy would essentially be driven by events in East Timor and Indonesia.

Habibie’s Audacity Generates Risks for Australia and Indonesia

Habibie’s announcement was publicly supported by the Indonesian Defence Minister, General Wiranto, but there was concern as to whether the Indonesian military (TNI) was willing and able to ensure a secure voting environment.⁹ The military occupation of East Timor had exerted a heavy casualty toll on the TNI and the possibility of a coup against Habibie still worried Australian officials. Beyond the risk of aggravating civil-military tensions in Jakarta, the conduct of a self-determination ballot would place the TNI’s behaviour in East Timor under the spotlight of global media attention. Violent incidents in East Timor might now generate additional international criticism of Indonesia—this could affect investor confidence and undermine Jakarta’s efforts to recover from the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis.

Following Habibie’s announcement, there was considerable debate as to how self-determination would be achieved. At the conclusion of a Tripartite meeting in early February 1999, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, argued that “a referendum was not the way to proceed, because that would only reopen old wounds and re-ignite old tensions”.¹⁰ Although alternate

⁷ J. Howard and A. Downer, interviews with the author, 2012.

⁸ J. Dauth, former Deputy Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, interview with author, 2012.

⁹ Although the Indonesian military were known at this stage as *Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia* (ABRI)—the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia, the term *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (TNI)—Indonesian National Armed Forces—adopted in 1999—is used throughout this article.

¹⁰ A. Alatas, *The Pebble in the Shoe: The Diplomatic Struggle for East Timor* (Jakarta: Aksara Karunia, 2006), p. 157.

options were considered, these were discounted and on 11 March 1999 it was agreed that a direct ballot would be conducted.¹¹

Meanwhile, the situation in East Timor was beginning to worsen. In response to Habibie's offer of a special status in 1998, pro-integration militias had formed and in February 1999 there were reports that they were receiving arms and supplies from the TNI.¹² In late February Downer voiced his concerns to Alatas, but these were dismissed: Alatas claimed the TNI was not establishing new militia groups but arming civil defence units, which was a "legitimate" action.¹³ This démarche established a pattern repeated regularly throughout 1999—Australian officials would raise their concerns about security in East Timor, only to have these rebuffed or ignored by their Indonesian counterparts. Concerned about how the violence could adversely affect the bilateral relationship and Indonesia's international standing, Australian ministers—particularly Downer—would consistently downplay the connections between the militias and TNI.¹⁴

Were there Tensions in Australian Policy—Diplomacy or Peacekeeping?

Australia responded swiftly to the self-determination announcement. On the diplomatic front, in late February the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Ashton Calvert, had several meetings with the American Assistant Secretary of State, Stanley Roth. The meetings, scheduled to discuss developments in East Timor, also included Varghese. The summary records of these meetings were leaked in 1999 and are used by Clinton Fernandes to argue that Australia was determined to prevent the deployment of a PKF.¹⁵ However, a careful examination suggests a more nuanced position. According to press reports quoting the leaked documents, Calvert believed that the international community could "induce East Timorese and Indonesian leaders to work towards an orderly and peaceful transition and to avert the need for recourse to peacekeepers".¹⁶ Varghese echoed this sentiment by noting that

¹¹ United Nations Press Release, SG/SM/6922, 12 March 1999.

¹² D. Greenlees, 'E Timor—Divide and Conquer', *The Australian*, 6 February 1999.

¹³ P. Edwards and D. Goldsworthy, *Facing North: A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004), p. 232. See also P. Kelly, *March of the Patriots—the Struggle for Modern Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2009), p. 496.

¹⁴ See Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p. 496.

¹⁵ See Fernandes, 'The Road to INTERFET', pp. 88-9.

¹⁶ J. Lyons, 'The Secret Timor Dossier', *The Bulletin*, 12 October 1999.

an early offer of a peacekeeping operation [PKO] would remove any incentive for the East Timorese and Indonesians to sort out their differences.¹⁷

Although Roth did defend his personal belief that a “full-scale peacekeeping operation would be an unavoidable aspect of the transition”,¹⁸ only a few weeks later he publicly supported Australia’s policy by testifying to Congress that it was

premature to talk about troops in East Timor...we are pushing so aggressively to try to break this cycle of violence so that we will not have to end up with the hard choices about a PKO.¹⁹

Following Habibie’s decision, the Department of Defence acted quickly to prepare for a variety of worst-case scenarios. Despite the government’s preference for the TNI to improve the security situation and thus avoid an Australian Defence Force (ADF) deployment, Defence knew that if violence escalated in East Timor then a PKF might be required. Though DFAT believed that the “very fact of raising force readiness levels” might become something of a “self-fulfilling prophecy”,²⁰ on 9 February 1999—only two weeks after Habibie’s decision—the National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSCC) approved a Defence recommendation to bring another Australian Army brigade to a greater state of readiness.²¹ This was announced by Defence Minister John Moore on 11 March 1999—downplaying the notion that this decision was made solely with reference to East Timor, he emphasised that Indonesia and the East Timorese retained responsibility for security and that it would be “premature to make any decision about ADF involvement in any peacekeeping role”.²²

Despite Moore’s public claim, one of the key reasons for this decision was the possibility that Australia might make a substantial contribution to a PKF in East Timor—Defence had explained to the NSCC that the single brigade already at a higher level of operational readiness would be insufficient to

¹⁷ Ibid. Importantly, at this point the mechanism for testing East Timorese opinion had not yet been decided—this might have influenced Calvert and Varghese’s views on the prospects for violence.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ S. Roth, in testimony to the United States of America Congress, ‘Indonesia: Countdown to Elections’, hearing before the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, one hundred and sixth Congress, first session, 18 March 1999, p. 17.

²⁰ P. Barratt, former Secretary of the Department of Defence, interview with author, 2012. This view was supported by J. Moore, C. Barrie, A. Behm and H. White, in interviews with the author, 2012.

²¹ D. Connery, *Crisis Policymaking: Australia and the East Timor crisis of 1999* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010), pp. 23-4; White, ‘The Road to INTERFET’, p. 75.

²² Commonwealth of Australia, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 11 March 1999.

secure East Timor.²³ A long-term, multi-nation PKF—with Indonesian consent—would be the only realistic scenario.²⁴

Against this backdrop, Defence began to plan not for a pre-ballot PKF, but rather a post-ballot PKF that would “take responsibility for security over from TNI if East Timor opted for independence”.²⁵ However, there was a question as to whether the Tripartite process would make provision for a pre-ballot PKF. The UN argued for a pre-ballot PKF during a Tripartite meeting on 10-11 March, but this suggestion was “indignantly rejected by Alatas, who argued forcefully that this was a matter of national honour and sovereignty”.²⁶ In late March 1999 Francsec Vendrell, a UN official working with Jamsheed Marker, visited Canberra to discuss East Timor.²⁷ In these talks, White suggested that although he was not formally speaking on behalf of the Australian Government, the ADF would probably make a “substantial contribution” if a pre-ballot PKF was organised by the UN.²⁸

White’s enthusiasm for a pre-ballot PKF was not shared by other Australian Government departments. Varghese noted that at this time PM&C officials believed that although a PKF was desirable “it was unrealistic, because the Indonesians wouldn’t accept it”.²⁹ DFAT advised Downer that it concurred with the UN’s advice: “given Indonesia’s sovereignty over the province during the period of the ballot, that TNI retain responsibility for security”.³⁰ The official publication from DFAT notes that Vendrell emphasised:

There was no prospect of the Indonesian Government acquiescing to any form of non-Indonesian military or police presence to assist with ensuring security in the period leading up to the consultation. Planning for a security contingent would have to focus on the post-ballot period.³¹

Vendrell reported back to the UN and recommended a variety of measures to reduce the likelihood of violence, but—perhaps believing it to be a lost cause—his advice stopped short of advocating a pre-ballot PKF.³²

²³ H. White, J. Moore, interviews with author, 2012. Some interviewees also noted that a single brigade at higher readiness would not be sufficient if circumstances warranted simultaneous deployments in the South-West Pacific.

²⁴ P. Barratt, interview with author, 2012.

²⁵ White, ‘The Road to INTERFET’, p. 76.

²⁶ J. Marker, *East Timor: A Memoir of the Negotiations for Independence*, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2003), p. 139.

²⁷ Lyons, ‘The Secret Timor Dossier’, p. 28; Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor in Transition*, pp. 72-4.

²⁸ H. White, interview with author, 2012. See also White, ‘The Road to INTERFET’, p. 78.

²⁹ P. Varghese, interview with author, 2012.

³⁰ Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, p. 239. The source cited for this claim is a Ministerial Submission, dated 25 March 1999.

³¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor in Transition*, p. 74.

³² I. Martin, *Self-Determination in East Timor* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 2001), pp. 29-33. Martin notes that Vendrell recommended the withdrawal of some TNI and the disarming of militia groups.

Clearly, the Australian Government was not completely united on the prospect of a pre-ballot PKF. Downer believed that there was no prospect of Indonesia accepting a pre-ballot PKF, so it would be unhelpful to press the issue.³³ Defence—through White—argued that the UN should pursue this option through the Tripartite process, while DFAT and PM&C officials accepted Indonesia's insistence that TNI provide security. A common view of the Tripartite process—scepticism bordering on disdain—may have also caused Australian officials to overlook the importance of the security arrangements that might be agreed by the UN.

But these differences should not be overstated nor exaggerated. It is critical to observe that in their meeting with Stanley Roth, Calvert and Varghese did not argue that Australia was unwilling to contribute towards a PKF in East Timor—Calvert specifically noted that Australia would be willing to deploy peacekeepers if required, as long as they were not sent into a “bloodbath”.³⁴ At this stage, the official consensus was that while a pre-ballot PKF was desirable, Indonesia would simply never accept such a deployment. This sentiment was clearly conveyed in Habibie's initial response, in December 1998, to the Howard Letter.³⁵ Although the possibility of a PKF at some stage was not absolutely precluded, it is clear that Australian decision-makers readily accepted Habibie's position that an international presence in East Timor was unacceptable. From January-April 1999, Australia's main effort was to reduce the violence in East Timor through private representations to the Indonesian Government and the TNI.

The ADF Tries to Influence the TNI, with Uncertain Results

In September 1998 Australia's Chief of the Defence Force (CDF), Admiral Chris Barrie, had travelled to Jakarta to meet with General Wiranto, who was both Barrie's direct military counterpart as well as the Indonesian Defence Minister. During a meeting with Habibie and Wiranto, it was agreed that an ADF-TNI conference on civil-military relations would be held in 1999.³⁶ From 9-11 March 1999, several senior ADF officers and Defence officials visited Jakarta to attend what was known as the 'CDF-PANGAB Forum'.³⁷ Amid discussion on the TNI's role in post-Suharto Indonesia, Barrie privately encouraged Wiranto to make sure the TNI placed significant effort into ensuring a free and fair ballot, which would hopefully result in the incorporation of East Timor.³⁸ As the decision to raise the readiness of an Australian Army brigade was to be announced on 11 March, Barrie was also

³³ A. Downer, interview with author, 2012.

³⁴ Lyons, 'The Secret Timor Dossier'.

³⁵ P. Varghese, J. McCarthy, interviews with author, 2012.

³⁶ A. Behm, former First Assistant Secretary, International Policy Division, Department of Defence, interview with author, 2012.

³⁷ *Panglima Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia* (PANGAB)—Commander of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia.

³⁸ C. Barrie, interview with author, 2012.

tasked to explain this to Wiranto. Mindful of how Wiranto might perceive this action, Barrie “had to try to persuade him that it had nothing to do with East Timor”.³⁹

Importantly, events such as this contributed to the perception that the ADF was capable of influencing the TNI’s senior leadership—beyond supporting Indonesia’s progress through international funding efforts, Australia was also concerned with directly supporting the TNI in their effort to achieve further civil-military reform. Former Defence officials noted that at this point the TNI-ADF relationship was extremely strong, as evidenced by the conduct of the CDF-PANGAB Forum and the close cooperation on the possibility of evacuation flights for Australian citizens ahead of the Indonesian Presidential elections.⁴⁰

April 1999—Violence in East Timor Prompts Australian Efforts Towards a PKF

During the first few months of 1999, Australia’s intelligence agencies began to warn the government that the TNI were supporting militia violence in East Timor. A Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) *Current Intelligence Brief* in early March assessed that “further violence is certain”—while it noted that Wiranto’s views on the violence were not known, DIO believed that he was “at least turning a blind eye”.⁴¹ On 6 April 1999 militia forces attacked a churchyard in Liquica, killing up to sixty civilians in what was East Timor’s most violent incident since the Santa Cruz massacre in 1991.⁴² DIO reported two days later that while the TNI’s

exact role in the incident is unclear ... [TNI troops] had fired tear gas into the church and apparently did not intervene when the pro-independence activists were attacked ... [TNI] is culpable whether it actively took part in the violence, or simply let it occur.⁴³

On 17 April pro-integration militias attacked independence supporters in Dili, killing between twelve and twenty-eight.⁴⁴ These incidents were a significant escalation of violence and showcased the inability or unwillingness of the TNI to restrain militia activity. If allowed to continue unchecked, such incidents would endanger the ballot and significantly damage Indonesia’s reputation. Ugly scenarios began to concern Australian officials: if the ballot was subverted through a campaign of militia violence, it might ensure a very close outcome—perhaps in favour of independence by only a few

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ A. Behm, C. Barrie, interviews with author, 2012.

⁴¹ D. Ball, ‘Silent Witness: Australian Intelligence and East Timor’, *The Pacific Review*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2001), p. 44.

⁴² Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p. 120. It is believed that between 150-270 died in the Santa Cruz massacre—see Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor in Transition*, pp. 7-8.

⁴³ Ball, ‘Silent Witness’, p. 46.

⁴⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor in Transition*, p. 67.

percentage points.⁴⁵ Combined with possible allegations of impropriety around the conduct of the vote, this could provide a basis for the Indonesian Government to retain East Timor.⁴⁶ Thus, militia violence was placing Australia's strategic objective of a free and fair ballot at serious risk.

On 19 April 1999, Howard telephoned Habibie, urging him to prevent further violence in East Timor—Howard suggested a meeting, which was arranged for 27 April in Bali.⁴⁷ Only a few days before the summit, Australian officials were informed that the Tripartite arrangements—which had been agreed, but not yet signed—had assigned responsibility for security to the TNI.⁴⁸ Given the violence of the preceding two weeks, Australian officials were “concerned about how all of this could spin badly out of control”.⁴⁹ The Australian delegation agreed that some form of increased international presence would be required in order to ensure that the ballot would be perceived as legitimate.

But Habibie had already signalled his intent to resist a PKF—in their phone conversation, he told Howard that if a PKF “was imposed on Indonesia then it would abandon East Timor and the ballot and unilaterally withdraw”.⁵⁰ Downer regarded this threat as one of “Habibie’s constant secret messages to us”.⁵¹ Avoiding this scenario, which could amount to civil war in East Timor, was an objective that had to be balanced carefully against the need for a fair ballot.

There is no question that the Australian delegation would have preferred the ballot to be supervised by a multi-nation PKF.⁵² But many were sceptical as to whether this was possible. Varghese believed it was a “pie in the sky” concept—there was “no point going on and on about something which is just not going to happen”.⁵³ John Dauth, then a Deputy Secretary in DFAT notes

it wasn't an easy period dealing with the Indonesian system ... [we] made very careful judgements about every engagement with them, and one of those judgements had to be how much we pressed him [Habibie].⁵⁴

Although Habibie had consolidated his political position since the fall of Suharto, there was concern that his policy freedom on East Timor was still constrained by the TNI. Wiranto had accepted Habibie's decision to conduct

⁴⁵ H. White, interview with author, 2012.

⁴⁶ J. McCarthy, H. White, interviews with author, 2012.

⁴⁷ J. Howard, *Lazarus Rising* (Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), p. 342.

⁴⁸ H. White, interview with author, 2012.

⁴⁹ P. Varghese, interview with author, 2012.

⁵⁰ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, pp. 497-8. See also Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor in Transition*, p. 80.

⁵¹ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p. 498.

⁵² A. Downer, P. Varghese, H. White, J. McCarthy, interviews with author, 2012.

⁵³ P. Varghese, interview with author, 2012.

⁵⁴ J. Dauth, interview with author, 2012.

an act of self-determination, but it was felt that he would flatly refuse to accept a foreign military presence on Indonesian soil.

Between January and April 1999, Australia's actions had been driven largely by Habibie's announcement—shocked by his audacity, Australian officials readily accepted the self-determination *fait accompli*. Although officials understood the desirability of a PKF, given the preference for a diplomatic solution there was no willingness to push for a foreign military presence that Habibie would likely refuse. But the violence of April 1999 raised the stakes for both Australia and Indonesia. As the Australian delegation flew to Bali, it was focused on reconciling competing strategic objectives. Although a free and fair ballot was required, this had to be carefully balanced against Australia's enduring strategic interests—the need to maintain the bilateral relationship and avoid civil-military tension in Jakarta.

The Bali Summit

The Summit began with a private meeting between Howard and Habibie—in this discussion, Howard suggested that a pre-ballot PKF might assist with security in East Timor.⁵⁵ Howard writes that this produced a “metaphorical explosion” from Habibie, who explained that his “position would be absolutely untenable in Jakarta if he were to agree to this” request.⁵⁶ Although the point was not made explicitly it was clear that had Habibie accepted a pre-ballot PKF, this might have precipitated a civil-military showdown and posed the grave risk of a TNI coup.

Two conflicting Indonesian accounts of this meeting raise some questions about how hard Howard pushed Habibie. Dewi Fortuna Anwar believes Howard “pressed a number of times”, asking “explicitly” if Habibie would accept a PKF, whereas Alatas believes that Howard's approach was “not very strong ... he raised it because he probably needed to raise it”.⁵⁷ Howard himself did not think that Habibie would agree to his request, but “thought it was worth trying ... he'd already surprised me once!”⁵⁸ Once it had been determined that a PKF was precluded, the discussion turned to civilian police (CIVPOL) under UN authorisation—Habibie agreed to allow between 200-300 CIVPOL to supervise the ballot.⁵⁹

This private discussion was followed by a large plenary meeting, where Howard pushed for a large CIVPOL contingent. This suggestion visibly

⁵⁵ For differing accounts of this, see: Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor in Transition*, pp. 79-80; White, ‘The Road to INTERFET’, pp. 79-80; Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, pp. 343-4; Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p. 498-500.

⁵⁶ Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p. 343.

⁵⁷ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ‘The Ties that Bind’, *Four Corners* (television program), 14 February 2000.

⁵⁸ J. Howard, interview with author, 2012.

⁵⁹ Greenlees and Garran, *Deliverance*, p. 145.

angered Wiranto, who had an animated discussion with Habibie.⁶⁰ Paul Kelly's account of this meeting even has Wiranto gesturing aggressively to Habibie, indicating that any foreign presence in East Timor would be unacceptable.⁶¹ Howard then pointed beyond East Timor to Indonesia itself, noting that if the ballot was anything less than free and fair then "Indonesia's international standing would be damaged".⁶² Eventually, it was decided that an "adequate" number of UN CIVPOL—between 200-300 officers, as agreed in the private Howard-Habibie meeting—would assist Indonesian police in East Timor.⁶³

It was clear that such a small force would be incapable of preventing widespread violence, but it was hoped that the increased international presence—directly assisting the integrity of the ballot—might deter violence and reduce voter intimidation. Significantly, at the conclusion of the meeting Howard noted that it was still Australia's preference to see East Timor choose incorporation with Indonesia.⁶⁴

Was a Pre-Ballot PKF ever Possible?

Hugh White has since argued that in not corralling international support for a pre-ballot PKF and pushing Habibie further, Australia may have "missed the last best chance to avoid the disasters of September".⁶⁵ Though White is correct in reflecting that "there was little we could do, but we did less than we could have", it is unlikely that more strenuous efforts would have succeeded in securing a pre-ballot PKF.⁶⁶ International pressure on Indonesia may have helped, but the focus of the US and European powers was on events in the Balkans—it was difficult for Australia to attract Washington DC's attention to East Timor.⁶⁷ The violence of April 1999 demonstrated that a pre-ballot PKF was desirable, but it came too late in the Tripartite process to substantively influence the negotiations. Indonesian domestic politics also placed pressure on the process—Indonesia's next President would be elected in October 1999 and it was feared that if the ballot was delayed, then a new President might refuse to release East Timor.

An early 1999 effort to secure a pre-ballot PKF would also have entailed serious risks for Australia's primary strategic objectives. As evidenced by Habibie's frank comments to Howard in Bali—as well as Wiranto's behaviour in the plenary meeting, which Kelly characterises as Wiranto "giving Habibie his orders even in front of the Australians"—Habibie's acceptance of a pre-

⁶⁰ J. Moore, interview with author, 2012.

⁶¹ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p. 500

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ For a more detailed account of these discussions, see Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, pp. 500-2,

⁶⁴ See C. Johnstone and S. Spencer, 'Howard Pledges Police for Timor', *The Courier Mail*, 28 April 1999.

⁶⁵ See White, 'The Road to INTERFET', pp. 78-80.

⁶⁶ H. White, interview with author, 2012.

⁶⁷ See Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p. 503. Also A. Downer, interview with author, 2012.

ballot PKF might have precipitated a TNI coup.⁶⁸ The United States was particularly worried that pressure for a pre-ballot PKF might threaten the vote itself. Jamsheed Marker notes that in late April 1999 Roth:

made a forceful representation to us [the UN] about putting anything, either specific or conditional, to the Indonesians that could make President Habibie, whom Roth described as being at the end of this tether as regards East Timor, balk at the last fence.⁶⁹

Opinion is divided on the efficacy of Howard's meeting with Habibie. For John McCarthy, then Australia's Ambassador to Indonesia, an agreement for UN CIVPOL "was presented as a victory ... but really it was a loss, because we didn't get peacekeepers".⁷⁰ Varghese believes Australia "pushed as hard as we could, and what we ended up with on the police side was probably a bit more than we might have expected".⁷¹ Given Australia's relatively weak bargaining position—and Habibie's precarious situation with regards to the TNI—Howard probably achieved all he could at the Bali Summit without endangering Australia's primary strategic objectives. Given the importance Australia placed on supporting Indonesia's democratisation and maintaining the bilateral relationship, the cautious approach of Howard and Downer was likely the more prudent choice. As Howard's International Advisor, Michael Thawley later reflected, it was probably an unfortunate reality that "sometimes things have got to get bad, before they get worse, before they get better".⁷²

May-June 1999—Australia and the UN Prepare for the Ballot

On 5 May 1999, the Indonesian and Portuguese Foreign Ministers met in New York to sign the Tripartite agreements. The agreement on modalities stipulated that the ballot would occur on 8 August 1999—an ambitious timeframe, agreed by the UN due to Habibie's insistence that the East Timor issue be resolved during his presidency.⁷³ Given the US requirement for Congress to be consulted, the United Nations Assistance Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) was not officially established until 11 June 1999 although its head, Ian Martin, arrived in Dili on 1 June 1999.⁷⁴

On 7 June, Indonesia held elections for the People's Representative Council. These were conducted peacefully and without military interference—a notable achievement in light of Indonesia's history. Habibie's party came

⁶⁸ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p. 500. The possibility of a coup was also noted by several interview participants.

⁶⁹ Marker, *East Timor*, p. 154.

⁷⁰ J. McCarthy, interview with author, 2012.

⁷¹ P. Varghese, interview with author, 2012.

⁷² M. Thawley, interview with author, 2012.

⁷³ Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor in Transition*, p. 97.

⁷⁴ Martin, *Self-determination in East Timor*, pp. 39-40.

second by a wide margin—Megawati Sukarnoputri's strong polling suggested she was likely to win the presidential election in October.⁷⁵ She had openly criticised Habibie's action on East Timor and "considerable diplomatic effort was put into convincing Megawati that she should honour Habibie's commitments".⁷⁶ Thus, the domestic political situation in Jakarta put further pressure on the timing of the ballot.

As UNAMET began its preparation, conditions on the ground also posed serious challenges. Martin found that while the international presence had a calming effect in Dili, militia violence in regional areas had caused some 40 000 East Timorese to become internally displaced.⁷⁷ The voter registration process, which was meant to begin on 22 June 1999, was rescheduled to begin on 16 July.⁷⁸

Australia's Second Message to the TNI

After their failure to secure a pre-ballot PKF in Bali—and following repeated denials that the TNI were involved in assisting the militia—Australian decision-makers decided to try a new approach to senior TNI officers. Australian intelligence collection had revealed "a clear picture of the TNI-militia linkages at [the] operational level" and on 18 May 1999, the Cabinet authorised an Australian mission to Jakarta. This delegation would explain Australia's knowledge of these links and warn the TNI that their covert activities would eventually become public knowledge.⁷⁹

On 21 June 1999, the Vice Chief of the Australian Defence Force, Air Vice Marshal Doug Riding, delivered this message to the TNI's Chief of Staff for Territorial Affairs, Lieutenant-General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Accompanying Riding were John McCarthy and a senior Defence official, Allan Behm. The Australian message was blunt and unequivocal:

In our opinion the most significant threats to a genuinely free ballot come from the pro-integrationist militia groups, supported by TNI. So long as this occurs, Indonesia's claims to be supporting a fair and open process will be undermined. This is very seriously damaging the credibility of the Indonesian Government and TNI.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p. 156.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116. See Marker, *East Timor*, pp. 170-1, for an example of such diplomatic efforts.

⁷⁷ Martin, *Self-determination in East Timor*, p. 45. See also T. Samuel, 'East Timor: The Path to Self-determination' in C. Sriram and K. Wermester (eds), *From Promise to Practice: Strengthening UN Capacities for the Prevention of Violent Conflict* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), p. 217.

⁷⁸ See United Nations, 'Question of East Timor', Report of the Secretary-General, S/1999/705, 22 June 1999.

⁷⁹ Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, p. 241.

⁸⁰ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p. 167.

McCarthy remembers this encounter as having little effect on Yudhoyono, who politely deflected the accusatory statements.⁸¹ According to White, though Australia

knew quite a lot about what was happening on the ground in East Timor, we knew very little about how it was connected with Jakarta ... we knew there was a connection, but we never saw what it was.⁸²

Without proof of this connection—the proverbial ‘smoking gun’—the visit did not result in any discernable reduction in violence.

Australia’s Contingency Planning—Was there a Dispute with America’s Pacific Command?

Concerned about the prospects for post-ballot violence, in May 1999 Australia began contingency planning—at the UN’s request—for an evacuation of UN personnel from East Timor. This was named *Operation Spitfire*.⁸³ After the Bali Summit, some Australian decision-makers now regarded the eventual deployment of ADF troops to East Timor as almost certain⁸⁴ and the ADF began planning for a post-ballot PKF—a force to be deployed following a ballot for independence and an Indonesian parliamentary decree releasing East Timor.

By July 1999 there were firm ideas of how Australia might contribute to a post-ballot PKF and Marker was briefed on Australia’s ability to deploy two brigades under UN authority.⁸⁵ It is important to specify that at this stage, Australian officials did not anticipate—nor plan—the deployment of an Australian-led PKF immediately after the ballot. As Defence had earlier advised the government that the “ADF lacked the resources to stabilise East Timor once it came apart”, the planning was premised on the concept of a UN-led PKF in late 1999.⁸⁶

In June 1999 the US Pacific Command (PACOM), based in Hawaii, requested that Australia assign liaison officers to participate in contingency planning for East Timor.⁸⁷ PACOM’s operational plans focused on the US military using “overwhelming force” to “stop the killing” that might accompany or follow the ballot.⁸⁸ Clinton Fernandes has argued that Australia’s decision

⁸¹ J. McCarthy, interview with author, 2012.

⁸² H. White, interview with author, 2012. See also Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p. 166.

⁸³ White, ‘The Road to INTERFET’, p. 80.

⁸⁴ J. Moore, A. Behm, interviews with author, 2012.

⁸⁵ Marker, *East Timor*, pp. 178-9.

⁸⁶ H. White, interview with author, 2012. This view was also supported by A. Behm, in his interview with the author, 2012. See also S. Aylmer, ‘Timor: Downer Says There’s No Rift with US’, *The Australian Financial Review*, 2 August 1999.

⁸⁷ P. Daley, ‘US Marines Set For Dili’, *The Age*, 10 August 1999.

⁸⁸ P. Daley, ‘Downer Trips Over Secret Timor Cable’, *The Age*, 11 August 1999.

not to assist this planning was part of a campaign to prevent a PKF, but his account overlooks two critical factors.⁸⁹

Firstly, this was routine contingency planning conducted by PACOM—it did not illustrate US enthusiasm for a PKF. A leaked cable records the US Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific, Admiral Denis Blair, specifically noting that it “was unclear which way Washington would jump”—PACOM’s work was “no more than prudent planning at this stage”.⁹⁰ On this issue, Australia was very well aware of the distance between Hawaii and Washington DC. According to White, Australia “knew the Pentagon wasn’t going to buy this”—a claim only supported by America’s reluctance to contribute ground forces in September 1999.⁹¹

Secondly, PACOM’s concept for a PKF in East Timor was heavily influenced by the US military’s mid-1990s experience in Somalia—“their force protection doctrine had gone right out of control ... their requirements were to establish a citadel in the middle of Dili”.⁹² This notion is supported by Moore, who was reluctant to sanction American leadership of a PKF—“we were concerned that they would overplay their hand with Indonesia” and that this might create long-term problems for the Australia-Indonesia relationship.⁹³

June-August 1999—Violence puts Pressure on the Ballot, and on Australia’s Objectives

In June and July, further security incidents in East Timor cast doubt on whether the ballot should proceed.⁹⁴ Due to the attacks against UNAMET and the issue of voter intimidation, Martin recommended to New York that preparations for the ballot “should remain suspended until the Indonesian Government had taken action resulting in a clear improvement in the security situation”.⁹⁵ McCarthy, who then believed that proceeding would pose an unacceptable risk of violence, conveyed his supporting view to Canberra.⁹⁶

These conditions posed severe challenges for UNAMET, but Marker and Annan decided that any significant delay might threaten the entire process—Annan reported to the UN Security Council that he decided to progress with voter registration

⁸⁹ See Fernandes, ‘The Road to INTERFET’, pp. 90-1.

⁹⁰ Daley, ‘Downer Trips Over Secret Timor Cable’.

⁹¹ H. White, interview with author, 2012. This view was also supported by A. Downer, in an interview with the author, 2012.

⁹² H. White, interview with author, 2012.

⁹³ J. Moore, interview with author, 2012.

⁹⁴ See Edwards and Goldworthy, *Facing North*, p. 242.

⁹⁵ Martin, *Self-determination in East Timor*, pp. 48-9.

⁹⁶ J. McCarthy, interview with author, 2012.

based on positive assurances by the Indonesian authorities, on the condition that meaningful, visible improvements in the security situation will be observed in the immediate future.⁹⁷

This course of action was strongly supported by Australia—Downer believed that if “the militias on the ground knew that violence would stop the ballot, then they would just become more and more violent”.⁹⁸

The voter registration period began on 16 July 1999—the UN Secretary General soon reported that “the first few days of registration have proceeded relatively peacefully, the East Timorese turning out to register in substantial numbers”.⁹⁹ The relatively peaceful conduct of the registration period contrasted with earlier violent incidents and raised the possibility that the ballot itself might not be accompanied by significant violence. Interviewed in 2001, McCarthy recalled that

things weren't necessarily always as bad as you thought they were going to be ... there was a conflicting flow of evidence as to what might happen.¹⁰⁰

Australian officials knew that any significant postponement of the ballot would likely amount to a cancellation that would destroy Indonesia's international standing—a dire scenario for Australia's strategic objectives. Since April, Australia had done all it could prudently do to reduce violence in East Timor—it had cautioned TNI about support for the militia, deployed CIVPOL to assist the ballot and begun preparations for a post-ballot PKF. Australian officials knew that some level of violence would accompany the ballot: closest to the action, McCarthy felt that there was “going to be a price paid” for self-determination.¹⁰¹ But considered against the consequences of a cancellation, a relatively free and fair ballot—even one accompanied by violence—was seen as the best choice amongst a range of unpalatable options.

A Vote for Independence ... and its Consequences

On 30 August 1999, 98.6 per cent of those who had registered to vote participated in the act of self-determination.¹⁰² Only a few violent incidents occurred and the day of the ballot was surprisingly calm. However, on 2 and 3 September the security situation deteriorated—militia forces began to target East Timorese working for UNAMET and foreign journalists began to

⁹⁷ United Nations, Letter from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/1999/786, 14 July 1999. See also Marker, *East Timor*, p. 176.

⁹⁸ A. Downer, interview with author, 2012.

⁹⁹ United Nations, 'Question of East Timor', Report of the Secretary-General, S/1999/803, 20 July 1999.

¹⁰⁰ J. McCarthy, interview with Paul Edwards, Oral History Section, National Library of Australia, 25 June 2001. Copy in author's possession.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, p. 244.

evacuate.¹⁰³ UNAMET decided to release the ballot results earlier than scheduled and on the morning of Saturday 4 September 1999, the results of the ballot were announced in Dili, with a simultaneous announcement in New York: 78.5 per cent had voted in favour of independence.¹⁰⁴

The violent response was immediate. Angered by the scale of their defeat, pro-integration militias began to attack UNAMET buildings and staff in regional areas.¹⁰⁵ In many cases, despite militia attempts to prevent the evacuation of East Timorese working for UNAMET, foreign staff refused to evacuate unless their East Timorese colleagues could accompany them.¹⁰⁶ As the militias retreated towards West Timor, they looted and burnt most of Dili—a UN spokesman noted that “the principal weapon was gasoline”.¹⁰⁷

The scale and severity of the violence shocked Australian decision-makers, particularly given the relatively peaceful conduct of the ballot itself.¹⁰⁸ Howard and Downer called their Indonesian counterparts, insisting that the TNI needed to control the militias and stop the violence.¹⁰⁹ With Indonesia’s consent, on 6 September the ADF began to evacuate UNAMET’s non-essential staff from Dili—*Operation Spitfire* had begun.¹¹⁰

Howard spent most of Monday 6 September on the phone. Kofi Annan called and asked if Australia was willing and able to lead a multi-national PKF in East Timor. As White has noted, “this was not a task for which Australia had specifically prepared”: “planning for this hadn’t crossed our mind, because we reached the judgement that we couldn’t do it”.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, Howard affirmed to Annan that Australia was ready to lead only if Indonesia consented to the insertion of a PKF. Howard called Habibie and suggested he admit an international force to restore order in East Timor, but Habibie resisted. He told Howard that he would declare martial law, but that if this failed to stop the violence then he would invite an international PKF to restore security.¹¹²

At an NSCC meeting on 7 September 1999, it was decided that an Australian-led PKF would require:

¹⁰³ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p. 194.

¹⁰⁴ United Nations, Letter from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/1999/944, 3 September 1999.

¹⁰⁵ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p. 199.

¹⁰⁶ Martin, *Self-determination in East Timor*, p. 95.

¹⁰⁷ J. Traub, ‘Inventing East Timor’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 4 (2000), p. 78.

¹⁰⁸ J. Howard, interview with author, 2012.

¹⁰⁹ A. Downer, J. Howard, interviews with author, 2012.

¹¹⁰ Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor in Transition*, p. 130.

¹¹¹ White, ‘The Road to INTERFET’, p. 82. The second quote is also from H. White, in an interview with the author, 2012. See also Australian National Audit Office, *Management of Australian Defence Force Deployments to East Timor* (Canberra ACT: Australian National Audit Office, 2002), pp. 27-30.

¹¹² J. Howard, interview with author, 2012.

- strong Asian participation,
- clear American support, including a security guarantee,
- Indonesian consent,¹¹³ and
- a robust mandate, authorising the PKF to take “all necessary means” under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.¹¹⁴

DFAT and Defence wasted no time in securing South-East Asian commitment to the operation and soon “obtained early expressions of support ... from the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, New Zealand and Malaysia”.¹¹⁵ Given the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) norm of “non-interference”, this was an encouraging result for Australian planners.¹¹⁶ Although not all of these expressions of support translated into troop commitments, the willingness of Thailand to quickly commit over 1 600 troops—as well as the PKF’s Deputy Commander—was key in ensuring the force had strong regional representation.¹¹⁷ Importantly, this “diluted the impression that it was an Australian vs Indonesian confrontation”.¹¹⁸

In a discussion with US President Bill Clinton on Monday 6 September, Howard asked for an American military contribution to a PKF. Howard specifically requested “ground troops”, but Clinton—citing commitments in the Balkans—declined to provide this support.¹¹⁹ Clinton’s inability to provide a quick contribution of ground forces shocked Howard—“it really brought home to me how much of a peace dividend they had taken out of the end of the Cold War”.¹²⁰ This had a significant impact on Howard—“we all felt a bit sort of alone on it ... it was a surprise when he said no to boots on the ground”.¹²¹ Beyond Clinton, the Pentagon was also determined to avoid US involvement. John Moore called the US Secretary of Defense, William Cohen, and requested only a limited commitment—“a ship, a plane, at the very least”—to demonstrate US support. Cohen relayed the Washington DC

¹¹³ Aside from being an Australian precondition, this was also required to ensure that China did not veto a UN Security Council resolution.

¹¹⁴ This process is covered in White, ‘The Road to INTERFET’, pp. 82-3; and Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, pp. 505-7.

¹¹⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor in Transition*, p. 134.

¹¹⁶ See A. Dupont, ‘ASEAN’s Response to the East Timor Crisis’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2000), pp. 163-70.

¹¹⁷ M. Thawley, interview with author, 2012. See also Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p. 351.

¹¹⁸ B. Nicol, *Timor: A Nation Reborn* (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2002), p. 322.

¹¹⁹ J. Howard, ‘Reflections on the Australia-United States Alliance’, Speech to the United States Study Centre at the University of Sydney, 15 February 2011, <<http://tinyurl.com/howardspeech1>> [Accessed 15 May 2012].

¹²⁰ J. Howard, interview with author, 2012.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* Downer expressed similar sentiments in an interview with the author, 2012.

view that the US would not be supporting the PKF. Moore replied “well, so much for the ANZUS treaty”.¹²²

These difficulties continued for several days: on Tuesday 7 September, Downer publicly berated the Clinton administration, commenting that

it has been enormously difficult to get the Americans to give us any commitments on troops and logistics support ... Australians would be very disappointed if the United States decided against participating.¹²³

This elicited a quick reaction from the US Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, who rang Downer to express her displeasure at his comments.¹²⁴ Clinton’s National Security Adviser, Sandy Berger, also aggravated the issue by frivolously comparing the situation in East Timor to his daughter’s messy room—some perceived this as “a very sharp reminder to Australia that when the chips are down, you cannot always automatically bank on the USA”.¹²⁵ For these few days, at the political level, the intimacy of the Australia-US relationship was at significant risk.

Australia’s leaders had hoped for a rapid commitment of American ground forces for “the symbolism of their direct involvement”,¹²⁶ but Howard’s initial request was the wrong approach given America’s military commitments in the Balkans. Perhaps more significantly, it was also not what the ADF required—Australian defence officials were not concerned about a ground force contribution, but rather transport, logistical assistance, intelligence support and—most importantly—the promise of an American security guarantee. These supporting elements were agreed in a teleconference on Wednesday 8 September, enabling Clinton to ring Howard and commit to the PKF, which would be called the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET).¹²⁷

Although Downer and Howard were dissatisfied that it took several days to reach this point, from the US perspective this was a “highly accelerated decision-making process”.¹²⁸ Having resolved to throw their support behind Australia’s efforts to secure a PKF, the US now moved to amplify the diplomatic and financial pressure on Jakarta. On Friday 10 September, as Clinton left to attend an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum

¹²² J. Moore, interview with author, 2012. ANZUS—the Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty—is commonly regarded as the cornerstone of Australia’s defence planning arrangements.

¹²³ R. Garran, ‘US Should Repay Loyalty’, *The Australian*, 8 September 1999.

¹²⁴ A. Downer, interview with author, 2012.

¹²⁵ T. Fischer, former Deputy Prime Minister of Australia, interview with author, 2012. For Berger’s comments, see L. Wright, ‘US Adviser Apologises for “Stupid Metaphor”’, *Canberra Times*, 20 September 1999.

¹²⁶ A. Downer, interview with author, 2012.

¹²⁷ See Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p. 509.

¹²⁸ E. Schwartz, ‘A Reminder That Friends In Deed Are Friends Indeed’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 July 2001.

meeting in Auckland, he called for Indonesia to accept a PKF: “if Indonesia does not end the violence, it must invite—*it must invite*—the international community to assist in restoring security”.¹²⁹ He also alluded to the fact that, in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis, Indonesia’s economic future was still dependent on international funding: if Indonesia refused a PKF there would be “overwhelming public sentiment to stop the international economic cooperation”.¹³⁰

By the time Clinton arrived in Auckland for APEC, he and Howard were united in their message: Indonesia must consent to an international PKF or face the economic consequences. Although the East Timor situation was not technically considered as part of the APEC agenda, an informal meeting of foreign ministers enabled concerned countries to voice their support for a PKF.¹³¹ This meeting “galvanised support for intervention, and demonstrated to Indonesia the concern of its ASEAN colleagues over events in East Timor”.¹³²

The “extraordinary crescendo of diplomatic pressure” on Indonesia had come to its zenith.¹³³ Isolated in the international community, Indonesia faced financial Armageddon: the rupiah had slipped significantly against the US dollar and there was a very real prospect of punitive financial action.¹³⁴ With no further room for recalcitrance, on Sunday 12 September 1999 Habibie requested that the UN provide a PKF for East Timor.

Finalising the UN Security Council Resolution and Deploying INTERFET

With Indonesia having signalled its willingness to accept a PKF, work began on the text of a UNSC resolution. Although Indonesia would have preferred a less authoritative Chapter VI mandate, the resolution passed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.¹³⁵ The PKF was tasked to “restore peace and security in East Timor...protect and support UNAMET...[and] facilitate humanitarian assistance”: importantly, the Chapter VII resolution allowed the PKF to “take all necessary measures to fulfil this mandate”.¹³⁶

Australia’s final deployment condition required the TNI to understand that any opposition to the deployment would attract the wrath of the US military. Although Paul Kelly claims that Cohen visited Jakarta on the “eve of the

¹²⁹ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p. 248. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁰ P. Shenon, ‘President Asserts Jakarta Must Act or Admit Troops’, *The New York Times*, 10 September 1999.

¹³¹ A. Downer, interview with author, 2012.

¹³² Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p. 257.

¹³³ I. Martin and A. Mayer-Rieckh, ‘The United Nations and East Timor: From Self-determination To State-building’, *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2005), p. 131.

¹³⁴ See Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p. 260.

¹³⁵ See Martin, *Self-determination in East Timor*, pp. 113-4.

¹³⁶ United Nations, UN Security Council Resolution 1264, S/RES/1264, 15 September 1999.

operation' to warn that the 'deployment must not be contested', this cannot be independently corroborated.¹³⁷ However, on 16 September the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff met with General Yudhoyono and emphasised the need for the "full cooperation of the Indonesian military".¹³⁸ Closer to East Timor, this message was reinforced by the presence of Admiral Blair's command ship, the *USS Blue Ridge*, which was positioned in the Pacific Ocean. It seems likely that when Cohen visited Jakarta in late September, he delivered the more explicit warning to the TNI leadership that INTERFET must not be contested.¹³⁹

Australia's four conditions had been met; all that now remained was to deploy INTERFET to East Timor. The commander, Major-General Peter Cosgrove, flew to Dili on 19 September to discuss the entry of INTERFET with his TNI counterpart. This was a period of significant tension in the bilateral relationship—only days earlier, Indonesia had abrogated the Australia-Indonesia Agreement on Maintaining Security due to the "attitude and actions of Australia on the questions of East Timor".¹⁴⁰ It was agreed that instead of a helicopter insertion, which might risk miscalculation and conflict, the first Australian troops would arrive in Dili on Hercules transport aircraft.¹⁴¹ On 20 September 1999 INTERFET deployed 1 500 troops to Dili, beginning a new chapter in the history of East Timor.¹⁴²

The Lessons of INTERFET—Constraints on Australian Influence

Throughout 1999, Australia's efforts to influence Indonesian policy on East Timor had lacklustre results. Despite private discussions, Howard's efforts in Bali and the ADF's warning to the TNI leadership, Australia was unable to secure a reduction in violence. It could be argued that these results highlight the limits of Australia's influence in Jakarta, but this is too strong a conclusion to draw from what was an incredibly unique scenario. Habibie's approach to the self-determination process was driven by political and civil-

¹³⁷ Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p. 511. Archived records suggest that Cohen was in the US during the week immediately preceding the deployment of INTERFET—see Cohen, William, *News Advisories*, <<http://tinyurl.com/cohenarchive>> [Accessed 11 June 2012]. See also Cohen/Moore Joint Press Briefing, 29 September 1999, <<http://tinyurl.com/cohenmoore>> [Accessed 15 May 2012].

¹³⁸ E. Becker, 'U.S. and Indonesian Generals Discuss Safety of Troops in Timor', *The New York Times*, 16 September 1999.

¹³⁹ See Kelly, *March of the Patriots*, p. 511.

¹⁴⁰ Commonwealth of Australia, *East Timor in Transition*, p. 145.

¹⁴¹ Garran and Greenlees, *Deliverance*, p. 274.

¹⁴² The operational conduct of INTERFET falls outside the scope of this study. Interested readers will find that *Deliverance* by Garran and Greenlees provides an excellent overview. For a more detailed account, see B. Breen, *Mission Accomplished, East Timor: Australian Defence Force participation in the International Forces East Timor (INTERFET)* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2000).

military realities in Jakarta and it is unsurprising that these were beyond Australian influence. Given Australia's primary goals—maintaining the bilateral relationship and avoiding civil-military tensions in Jakarta—Canberra had to pursue its secondary goals, such as avoiding violence in East Timor, in a measured and responsible way, ensuring that these efforts did not further jeopardise Australia's primary objectives.

However, once the eyes of the world were focused on East Timor and these constraints shifted, Australia's diplomatic efforts achieved rapid and remarkable successes. Australia's ability to marshal diplomatic pressure on Indonesia and coordinate military contributions for a PKF ensured that East Timor was able to separate from Indonesia in a reasonably straightforward manner. The deployment of a PKF in September 1999—which was desperately needed in order to prevent further damage to Indonesia's international credibility—would not have occurred without Australia. Although some Indonesians might still resent Australia's role in this transition, alternative scenarios might have proven worse. Had Indonesia refused to admit an international PKF—or had the TNI resisted the deployment of INTERFET—the future of a democratic Indonesia could have been seriously imperilled.

The unique circumstances that led to East Timor's independence are very unlikely to recur. However, given an ongoing focus on conditions in West Papua, it is worth remembering that with the exception of a very brief period in 1999—when minimising the damage caused by East Timor's separation was the top priority for Canberra—Australian Governments of both political persuasions have consistently prioritised the Australia-Indonesia relationship above almost all other concerns. There are no indications that this is likely to change and although the bilateral relationship has recovered from the nadir of September 1999, this was never an assured outcome—had events unfolded differently in September 1999, Australia might have been inextricably linked to a second Indonesian invasion of East Timor. If Jakarta were to ever adopt a new approach towards West Papua, it might be wisest for Australia to quietly support—rather than attempt to shape—Indonesia's efforts. Beyond allaying some Indonesian concerns about the sincerity of Australia's view that Indonesia retains sovereignty over West Papua, this approach could minimise any risk to the bilateral relationship.

'So Much for the ANZUS Treaty'—the Alliance in Practice

The events of 1999 highlight some communication issues within the ANZUS alliance, but these should not be overstated. Australian leaders were bitterly disappointed by President Clinton's first response, but the eventual provision of US support shows that these issues did not prove insurmountable. Despite the initial feeling of betrayal amongst Australia's political leaders, America quickly realised depth of this sentiment and moved to support Australia with meaningful security assistance. However, this initial dispute

demonstrates the importance of frank communication between close allies—Australia could have better managed the relationship by outlining to America earlier what support it would require in the event of a large-scale intervention, while the US could have made clearer to Australia the constraints posed by concurrent operations in the Balkans. Given the almost constant security cooperation since 1999 these issues may have already been addressed, but this instance acts as a cautionary tale for Australian leaders: American military support may not always simply be “on-call”. For America, it highlights the leadership role that Australia exercises in its region and the possibility that, in times of crisis, this will require active American support—even at the Presidential level.

Australia’s Strategic Policy Was Reactive, but Adroit

To fully understand Australia’s strategic policy towards East Timor throughout 1999, the unique pressures, constraints and challenges faced by Australian decision-makers must be appreciated. Although Australia failed to achieve several of its strategic objectives, most notably its desire to reduce violence in East Timor, this performance must be considered against the limited strategic options available to Australia. Having unintentionally prodded Habibie down the path of East Timorese independence, Australian leaders felt they had little choice but to support his decision and attempt to mitigate the worst consequences of the self-determination ballot. However, from January 1999 onwards, developments in East Timor were driven largely by Jakarta and were—to a significant degree—beyond Australia’s influence.

While Hugh White has correctly argued that Australia could have done more to support the inclusion of a pre-ballot PKF in the Tripartite agreements, it is doubtful that this approach would have been successful. Beyond the constraints posed by the Indonesian presidential election schedule and the international focus on the Balkans, a strenuous effort for peacekeepers would have also entailed serious risks—it would have increased the likelihood of civil-military instability in Jakarta and endangered Australia’s primary strategic objectives.

Reacting to the violence of April 1999, Howard pushed Habibie for a pre-ballot PKF but conceded when Habibie made it clear that he was unable to accept such a measure. This abandoned push for a pre-ballot PKF may have helped Australia in securing the increased UN CIVPOL presence in East Timor, which substantially assisted in ensuring the integrity of the ballot. Although Fernandes has argued that Australia worked to prevent a PKF, a careful examination of Australia’s actions throughout 1999 casts significant doubt on this thesis. Although it was unable to secure a pre-ballot PKF, Australia did support—and later defend—a free and fair act of self-determination. Throughout 1999, the need for a free and fair ballot was responsibly balanced against Australia’s primary concerns and competing objectives—to avoid further civil-military instability in Jakarta and to maintain

the bilateral relationship. The worst-case outcome—a fraudulent, cancelled or usurped ballot, with its attendant consequences for Indonesia, Australia and East Timor—was avoided.

Any evaluation of Australia's strategic policy throughout this period must consider that from January 1999 onwards, developments were driven largely by decisions in Jakarta, not Canberra. Australia's failure to secure a pre-ballot PKF and prevent violence in East Timor was not due to negligence, incompetence or apathy. Rather, Indonesia's actions often placed Australia in difficult positions, where reactions were required but strategic policy choices were limited. Critical objectives, such as maintaining the bilateral relationship and supporting Indonesia's stability and democratic progress, could have been threatened by reactive policymaking that failed to responsibly manage Australia's priorities. Although Australia often found itself playing second fiddle to Habibie and was unable to prevent the tragic violence of September 1999, strategic policy throughout this period was sound—the most important and enduring objectives were prioritised appropriately and worst-case outcomes avoided. This study has shown that in a series of very difficult and high-stakes situations, Australia probably achieved all it could.

Iain Henry is a doctoral candidate at the Australian National University's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre. He has previously worked in the Australian Army, the Australian Public Service and the private sector. He would like to thank Natalie Sambhi, Ivan Losada-Rodriguez, Marisa Losada-Bartel, Matthew Hill, Raoul Heinrichs, Thomas Messer and the anonymous referees for their comments on this article. iainhenry@outlook.com