

**NATIONAL WINNER
ASIA AND AUSTRALIA**



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AUSTRALIA AND EAST TIMOR

ABSTRACT

Since Australia assisted its close neighbour East Timor in its fight for independence there has been growing historical debate on Australia's motives for intervening: was it a selfless desire to 'make the world a better place' or to pursue its self-interest? This essay argues the truth is in the middle.

ESSAY

The East Timorese people for many decades suffered under the oppressive rule of the Indonesian government before their independence in 1999. The popular narrative is that Australia tried to create a better world by helping liberate the East Timorese people. However, it is recently been revealed that Australia did not commit to this action for the benefit of their neighbour, rather they used their peacekeeping contribution as a way of securing oil and gas revenue to which East Timor was actually entitled. Tellingly, other regions oppressed by Indonesia, like West Papua, do not receive our support, perhaps because there is less for Australia to gain economically. First, this essay will examine the conventional view that Australia acted selflessly, secondly, it will consider the revisionist account which argues Australia were exploitative, before finally conciliating between these two different perspectives.

According to the conventional narrative, Australia made a better world by assisting its tiny neighbour to achieve independence. The Indonesian government subjected East Timor to decades of violence and political repression; even when they finally let them be independent, they sent in state-sponsored militia to undermine the transition towards sovereign nationhood. East Timorese politician Xanana Gusmao described the Indonesians as "despicable, so violent...such brutes, from the top... down." In light of this threat, Australia convened and led INTERFET (International Force for East Timor), a multinational peacekeeping effort. Australia alone deployed 3000 troops and within just thirty days its General, Peter Cosgrove, said: "nearly 80 per cent of the country was returned to a state of peace and stability... allow[ing] most East Timorese to get on with their lives"¹. ABC news hailed the intervention as a success with 7.30 host Barrie Cassidy stating Howard's strategy "paid off"². Today John Howard regards the conflict as a key part of his legacy, stating that the intervention "directly led to the birth of a very small country whose people remain deeply grateful for what we did."³ To this day, Australia continues to use footage from the East Timor conflict in military recruitment

¹Peacekeepers Australia, "International force in East Timor" 27/03/17, <http://www.peacekeepers.asn.au/operations/INTERFET.htm>, viewed 22/03/17

² Kerry O'Brien, "Interview with John Howard", ABC News, 13/09/1999, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/stories/s51478.htm>, viewed 22/03/17

³ John Blaxland, "Seventeen years on, East Timor intervention remains a success", Sydney Morning Herald, 20/09/16, viewed 24/03/17 <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/seventeen-years-on-east-timor-intervention-remains-a-success-20160919-grjjqi.html>; viewed 24/02/17.

videos, a sign that it feels our history of involvement in the region is something about which we should be proud⁴.

Against this conventional narrative, there are three reasons to doubt Australia intervened to make the world a better place: its efforts to take East Timorese resources, its prior allegiance to Indonesia, and its current policy on West Papua. In 2002, an independent East Timor was desperate for Australian economic and military support, which the latter used to their advantage in negotiations over the oil fields in the Timor Sea⁵. The two nations signed a deal creating a maritime boundary which gave Australia 80% of the revenue⁶. In fact, international law said East Timor was entitled to 100% of the revenue because the sea border should be half way between both countries⁷. East Timor began an expensive case in the International Court of Justice and successfully forced Australia to abandon the old, unjust agreement⁸. If Australia had liberated them based solely on principles of aiding East Timor, then we would not have forced them to sign an unfair deal.

Secondly, from 1975 until the late 1990s Australia sided with the Indonesian and opposed East Timorese independence, because it wanted an alliance with the more powerful state. As an Australian diplomatic official stated at the time “The plain fact is that there are only 700,000 Timorese; what we are really concerned about is our relationship with 130,000,000 Indonesians.”⁹. Specifically, as now, Australia wanted access to oil and gas. Our ambassador to Indonesia in 1975 noted “This Department might well have an interest in closing the present gap in the agreed sea border and this could be much more readily negotiated with Indonesia... than with Portugal or independent Portuguese Timor.”¹⁰

Thirdly, other countries such as West Papua have also suffered from Indonesia’s oppression and, tellingly, Australia has done nothing to help them. If Australia believed the reasons for helping East Timor, then their

⁴ Australian Defence Force, “Australian Army Recruitment video”, 08/05/16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epoplZfLnv8> viewed 25/03/17

⁵ Henry Belot and Emily Stewart, “East Timor tears up oil and gas treaty with Australia after Hague dispute”, ABC News, 10/01/17, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-01-09/east-timor-tears-up-oil-and-gas-treaty-with-australia/8170476> viewed 29/03/17

⁶ John Blaxland, “Australia’s 1999 mission to East Timor part 1: the decision to intervene”, The Strategist, 02/10/15 <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australias-1999-mission-to-east-timor-part-1-the-decision-to-intervene/>, viewed 21/03/17

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ ABC News, “Global court agrees to take up Timor, Australia sea border row”, 27/09/16 viewed 23/03/17 www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-27/court-of-arbitration-takes-up-australia-timor-sea-border-row/7879286

⁹ Editorial, “Oil, imperialism and intervention: Australia’s sordid history in East Timor”, Solidarity, 19/02/14 viewed 20/03/17

<http://www.solidarity.net.au/mag/back/2014/64/oil-imperialism-and-intervention-australias-sordid-history-in-east-timor/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

actions with West Papua are contradictory: both regions distinct from Indonesia's Muslim majority, and subjected to repression and violence¹¹. Historian Stuart Rollo notes there is a long history of “ Australia's historical complicity in the suppression of West Papuan human rights”¹². Our inconsistency here supports the revisionists view that Australia aided East Timor because there was a financial incentive.

Ultimately, however, Australia still made the world a better place by liberating East Timor, even if that was not our primary motive. Australia invested militarily and economically in a beleaguered people, allowing them to flourish. Revisionist accounts overlook the fact that without Australia's assistance, East Timor would likely still be under the oppression of the Indonesian government and its agents. Today, Australia still provides \$99 million of aid to East Timor¹³ (although this is insignificant compared to the profits derived from their oil fields). Moreover, countries often require some motive to help out an ally: creating a better world will need to be justified to the public. On the eve of the East Timor intervention John Howard argued in a speech to Parliament “the first truth is that foreign policy needs to be based on a clear sense of the national interest” revealing that pragmatism rather than morality drive international relations. Consider: even the now-liberated nation of East Timor does not support the freedom of West Papuans because it would not be in their interest to challenge Indonesia¹⁴. However, this does not ultimately excuse the scale of Australia's greed: as a nation they used clandestine tactics that benefited them in negotiations with East Timor.

It is helpful there has been new media scrutiny on Australia's actions over the East Timorese oil and gas deposits. While no nation is entirely selfish or selfless, if Australia assists regional powers in the future they must do so more fairly, honestly and transparently. Australian historians play a pivotal role in ensuring future foreign policy is informed the lessons of the past so that our nation can continue to make a better world.

¹¹ Stuart Rollo “Ending our pragmatic complicity in West Papua”, ABC News, 28/10/13
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-28/rollo-west-papua-complicity/5049204>, viewed 23/03/17

¹²Ibid.

¹³ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade “Timor Leste: Country Breifing”, Australian Commonwealth Government, <http://dfat.gov.au/geo/timor-leste/pages/timor-leste-country-brief.aspx> viewed March the 1st.

¹⁴ “The World”, “*East Timor's former president Jose Ramos Horta says West Papua 'part of Indonesia'*”, ABC News, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-23/former-east-timor-president-says-west-papua-part-of-indonesia/6641088> viewed 01/04/17.

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