

All eyes on Timor Leste: juggling regional security sensitivities

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How should a small and fragile state cope with active interest in its underlined strategic value for the entire region from several surrounding neighbors? Moreover, how should such a country skillfully handle contradictory defense considerations emanating from a distinctive set of international security suitors without antagonizing any of them? As straightforward as they may seem, these are just some of the questions that today's policymakers must answer in Timor Leste, a country exhibiting more and more signs of a carefully designed security approach, based simultaneously on an equidistance between every major player and occasional tokens of commitment for a selective few.

Indeed, examples of this predisposition have abounded for the past few years, following not only the country's own process of gradual development and growth but also its timely episodes of structural crisis after 2002. The need to court and sometimes appease possible physical contributors to international peacekeeping missions on the ground since the early independence days, has thus come to best exemplify how Timor Leste still walks a thin line when trying to balance its immediate security needs with its long-term strategic interests.

Naturally, as the internal situation stabilizes, Timor Leste is bound to favor a gradual transition of responsibilities to its own security forces, under *Falintil – Forças de Defesa de Timor Leste* (F-FDTL) and *Polícia Nacional de*

Timor Leste (PNTL) supervision. For all accounts, any country's full sovereignty is only completely exercised when the resolution and management of its security and defense predicaments are under its direct control, and in that sense it is possible to understand and even sympathize with the level of public anticipation weighing on the Timorese leadership to finally get it right and demonstrate their capacity to properly tackle these issues without further international assistance.

In this context, the upcoming 2012 elections have been gradually pointed out as the tentative deadline for the end of the international forces' presence in Timor, since this occasion will supposedly confirm the maturity and viability of the country's democratic and security institutions. The latest United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution helps to substantiate this goal by only extending the mandate of the ongoing United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) for precisely one more year.¹

However, recent events have brought into the spotlight not only this self-imposed timeframe but also the strategic implications for some of Timor Leste's watchful neighbors. To begin with, in early April, a new report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) took aim

¹ See UNSC Resolution 1969/2011, adopted by the Security Council at its 6487th meeting, on February 24th 2011. As of March 31st, UNMIT included over 1,364 police personnel and 33 military liaisons from over 38 different nationalities.



at Australia's pre-announced intentions of accompanying the withdrawal of the remaining international community forces in Timor Leste, after the next elections.

As it so happens, following a discernible pattern of commitment to Timor's security for the past decade, Australia still currently retains over 400 military personnel on the island under Operation Astute and allocated to the Australian-led International Stabilization Force (ISF), while also providing military advisors and staff for UNMIT's general operations. The reasons behind such extensive contribution are not a secret to anyone. Right from the start, Australia quickly recognized the potential associated not only with Timor Leste's vast natural resources – which currently still top every bilateral agenda, even if bitter rhetoric tends to overshadow it – but also with its strategic location, inserted in the loosely called “near abroad” region. It is therefore no wonder that Australia's 2009 Defense White Paper recognizes Timor Leste's “security, stability and cohesion” as one of the country's strategic interests and that “after ensuring the defense of Australia from direct attack, the second priority task for the ADF [Australian Defense Forces] is to contribute to stability and security in the South Pacific and East Timor”.² The scope of the official focus granted to the small neighbor is therefore simply undeniable.

But what the ASPI report precisely covers is the fate of future Australian military on the ground in Timor Leste. As such, it ascertains that “while the chances of having to maintain a substantial long-term presence have subsided, a complete withdrawal may leave the ADF exposed to the risks of having to return at a later date”, thus recommending that “a small but highly effective dose of ADF prevention now would be more preferable, for regional stability, the well-being of the people of Timor-Leste, Australia's security and the training opportunities it would offer both ADF and F-FDTL personnel, compared to a potentially larger, reactive dose in the future”.³

However, this non-binding, grim but still realistic assessment of Timorese reality was immediately rebutted by both President José Ramos-Horta and F-FDTL Chief of the Armed Forces Major-General Taur Matan Ruak,⁴ who claimed they saw no need to extend the Australian forces' mission. Soon afterwards, on April 15th, Australian Defense Minister Stephen Smith traveled to Díli – officially marking the 10th anniversary of the Defense Partnership Agreement between Australia and Timor Leste –, thus taking upon himself the task of dispelling any supposedly pre-defined decision regarding the future maintenance of the Australian contingent.⁵

But be that as it may, one should always bear in mind that “Australian interests are inevitably engaged if countries in the region become vulnerable to the adverse influence of strategic competition”.⁶ In other words, Australia's interest in Timor Leste lies not only with preventing any further destabilizing unrest or structural underdevelopment that might lead to eventual spill-over effects arriving into its shores but also in containing, and preferably counteracting any undesirable third-party's leverage in Timor Leste's own internal affairs, with possible indirect implications for the region's security and stability.

In this case, the elephant in the room goes by the name of China, whose eyes have notoriously fallen on the young South Eastern Asian nation for quite a while now. For example, the funding for the construction of several Timorese governmental installations – including the Ministry of Defense and the F-FDTL headquarters – and the purchase of two US\$28 million Shanghai III patrol boats for the Timorese Navy have already raised some eyebrows in 2010. But if recent news reports are to be believed, China has already sought to take greater advantage of Timor Leste's strategic value, specially with the remaining international and regional context in mind. According to *The Age*, leaked US diplomatic cables attest that China “approached East Timor's government with an offer to establish a radar array to monitor shipping in the strategic Wetar Strait” in December 2007, in a bid which eventually did not go through after some apparent consultations with both the US and Australia and due to the fact that such a facility would only be manned by Chinese technicians. On the other hand, these same cables include some reassurances by President José Ramos-Horta, Deputy Prime Minister José Luís Guterres and Secretary of State for Defense Júlio Pinto that “Timor-Leste's strong preference is to cooperate with its democratic partners – Australia, Portugal, the US and Japan – on defense and security matters”.⁷

Interestingly enough, it is possible to observe a sharp contrast with Prime Minister José Alexandre ‘Xanana Gusmão's’ preferences when on September 2010 he declared that “we are firmly committed to incrementing bilateral cooperation in the military area with friendly countries that provide us with uninterested support. Our Chinese brothers and sisters are clearly part of this group”.⁸ In this statement, one could easily notice a possibly distinct view from his fellow peers, to say the least, but internal politics aside, these words only help underscore how the country manages different and frequently opposing security sensitivities amid the official discourse.

2 “Defending Australia the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030 / Defence White Paper 2009” (Ministry of Defence, 2009, 5.7 and 7.10), pp. 42 and 54.

3 Damien Kingsbury, “The ADF and Timor-Leste: looking towards 2020” in *A reliable partner: Strengthening Australia – Timor-Leste relations* (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Special Report, No. 39, April 2011), p. 20.

4 “Presidente do Timor critica sugestão de manter tropas estrangeiras no país até 2020” (Lusa, 14 April 2011); “Taur Matan Ruak discorda da Austrália sobre permanência de tropas em Timor-Leste” (Lusa, 21 April 2011).

5 Karlis Salna, “East Timor troop decision after poll: Smith” (AAP, 15 April 2011).

6 “Defending Australia the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030 / Defence White Paper 2009” (Ministry of Defence, 2009, 4.3.4), p. 35.

7 Philip Dorling, “Timor rejected Chinese spy offer” (The Age, 10 May 2011).

8 Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, “Address by His Excellency the Prime Minister on the Occasion of the Turning of the First Stone for the Construction of the Ministry of Defense and F-FDTL Headquarters Building”, 24 August 2010.



Still, between Australia and China's scrutiny of Timor Leste's intrinsic strategic value, a third actor is usually forgotten in the sidelines. Indeed, despite a painful legacy of abuse and human rights violations, Indonesia – Timor Leste's sole territorial neighbor – must necessarily be included on any local security assessment. Probably aware that bilateral wounds still run deep amid the Timorese society, the country's political leadership has tried to tread carefully in the reengagement of contacts with the Indonesian military. However, the existence of commonly pressing issues⁹ has led to a greater dialogue between both parties, which has in turn translated into greater maritime and border cooperation as well as military training in Indonesia for Timorese personnel. On top of that, Timor Leste has also recently expressed its wish to acquire two Indonesian-made fast patrolling boats (FPB), worth US\$20 million each, thus confirming that it is not presently too coy to expand its defense linkages, not the least of which with its former ruler.¹⁰ Overall, it has become increasingly clear that Timor Leste is slowly but carefully weaving an elaborate geopolitical tapestry, structured around its defense paradigm – diversification of security partners albeit if fundamentally aligned with Australia's protective umbrella and therefore by default with the US – but also with the significantly divergent interests of surrounding players in mind. The shrewd and cunning juggling of this regional triumvirate – composed of Australia, China and Indonesia – will likely continue to mold Timor Leste's regional insertion and bilateral security relations with these partners, in the hope of achieving the best possible scenario for the country's external interests, and ultimately its own internal stability.

⁹ See "Timor-Leste: Decusse and the Indonesian border" (*International Crisis Group*, Asia Briefing No. 104, 20 May 2010).

¹⁰ "Timor Leste interested in buying Indonesia-made ships" (*Antara*, 23 March 2011).

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