

**NATIONAL WINNER**  
**AUSTRALIA-ASIA RELATIONS**



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**CONTESTING AUSTRALIA'S**  
**JUSTIFICATION FOR THE INACTION**  
**DURING INDONESIA'S ANNEXATION OF**  
**EAST TIMOR**

## **Contesting Australia's justification for the inaction during Indonesia's Annexation of East Timor**

### **ABSTRACT:**

On the 7th of December 1975, Australia refused to intervene in Indonesia's annexation of East Timor. After contesting Australia's self-serving justifications that it was motivated by the general well-being of East Timor or the region, this essay argues Australia was really driven by economic and strategic self-interest.

### **ESSAY:**

On the 7th of December 1975, Australia passively refused to intervene in Indonesia's annexation of East Timor, looking away while hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians were killed, merely to maintain political stability with Indonesia<sup>1</sup>. The initial historic narrative proposed by the Australian Government was that they did not want to risk a civil war causing further separatist movements in the region. However, the Government was aware that Indonesia had repressed all major uprisings of minority groups in the past, meaning the risk of separatist breakdown was low. The second main justification was East Timor being unviable as an independent state, which does not stand given that Portugal, the former colonial power, had heavily neglected East Timor, and the local community had efficiently run its own affairs. Finally, the Australian Government pointed to the possibility of a communist movement within East Timor. This was, however, heavily exaggerated, due to the extremely minimal influence the local Marxist party had on the nation. After contesting these self-serving justifications, it becomes apparent that Australia's decision was not truly motivated by the general well-being of East Timor or the region, and was rather driven by economic self-interest and relations with their neighbour, Indonesia<sup>2</sup>. This crucial debate, explored throughout this essay, is relevant because it challenges our conception of Australia as a responsible, selfless defender of human rights with respect to East Timor, and encourages citizens to not uncritically accept official explanations of diplomatic decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> *Indonesia invades East Timor* 2019, HISTORY, viewed 25 May 2020, <<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/indonesia-invades-east-timor>>.

<sup>2</sup> Hopkins, A 2000, *Australia let Indonesia invade East Timor in 1975*, The Guardian, Canberra, viewed 25 May 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/sep/13/indonesia.easttimor>>.

One of the main contributing factors that the Whitlam Government pointed to, was the fear of a civil war, however the risk of a separatist movement was slight given Indonesia's demonstrated capacity to brutally suppress its own citizens. The Government was aware that in another ex-Portuguese colony, Angola, separatism had led to a long, drawn-out war, which would have resulted in a great number of casualties, over an extended period of time. The Australian Government stated that its priority was for peace within the ASEAN region. Nicholas Klar, writing on Whitlam's response to the Indonesian invasion of East Timor stated that, Whitlam was also concerned that revolution by separation movements, which may have occurred in Timor, could cause a domino effect, that could see the balkanization of Indonesia into several small states, such as West Papua, Aceh and Bali<sup>3</sup>. However, this risk was extremely slim due to Indonesia's historical suppression of its own nation. The Indonesian mass killings of 1965-66 were in response to civil unrest caused by a purported coup by communists<sup>4</sup>. These killings were partially concealed and downplayed by Indonesia, however, the Australian Government was secretly aware of the brutal extent of the mass killings. (This event also shows the selective deployment of history by all actors in the oppression of East Timor.) The Indonesian army and various death squads killed hundreds of thousands, possibly over one million of their own civilians<sup>5</sup>. If Indonesia was willing to kill this obscene number of their own people, moreover, there was no telling what they were willing to do to East Timor. Despite knowing about this event, Australia still saw it as acceptable to allow Indonesia to freely invade East Timor, with the full understanding of the brutal means and measures Indonesia would go in order to reinstate order and control over the land. As such, Australia could not have reasonably expected a separatist conflict, but should rather have predicted the violent suppression of East Timorese identity.

Another justification provided by the Whitlam Government was that East Timor was not viable as an independent state, both politically and economically, but this position cannot withstand critical scrutiny. As an example of this self-serving justification, Whitlam told a 1998 Senate Committee on East Timor that his government shared the view of the earlier Menzies Government, that East Timor was not viable politically or economically as an independent state<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, this remained

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<sup>3</sup> Klar, N 1993, *Essay: An evaluation of Gough Whitlam's response to Indonesian claims to East Timor.*, The Klar Books Site, viewed 26 May 2020, <<http://klarbooks.com/academic/timor.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> Tasevski, O n.d., *'No thoughts about apologising': Indonesia and the 1965-66 killings*, The Interpreter, viewed 28 May 2020, <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/no-thoughts-about-apologising-indonesia-and-1965-66-killings>>.

<sup>5</sup> *Indonesia's killing fields* 2012, Aljazeera, viewed 26 May 2020, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/101east/2012/12/2012121874846805636.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> ABC 1999, *Whitlam reveals his East Timor policy*, Australian Government, viewed 28 May 2020, <<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/stories/s71200.htm>>

Australia's policy for decades. Even Howard-era Foreign Minister Alexander Downer publicly stated that Australia's preference was for 'an arrangement by which East Timor would have a high degree of autonomy but remain legally part of Indonesia'. He continued by stating that they did not want an independent East Timor because of the perceived lack of viability<sup>7</sup>. This shows that Australia, at the time, did not believe that East Timor would have been able to function effectively as an independent state. This argument, however, must be contested by more critically analysing the history of East Timor. It seems somewhat patronising to decide the question of viability on behalf of the East Timorese. After Portugal went into geopolitical decline after World War I, it largely neglected its colonial possession, East Timor. The local citizens saw this in a positive light, as they were left free to control much of their own affairs, this was seen through the revival of the native language of Tetum alongside Portuguese, and a growing domestic economy. In addition, the worldwide move towards decolonisation encouraged the Timorese to consider Independence from Portugal. The internal strength and pressure for independence vastly increased and in the 1970s, a national liberation front was formed, which would result in decolonisation<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, one must consider East Timor's ability to contest the colonial authority of Portugal while also developing a democratic system with two political parties, Fretilin and the UDT. This shows the motivation and capability for stable democratic self-governance. Moreover, East Timor had always suffered under the control of others and struggled to achieve autonomy and protect human rights<sup>9</sup>. This was seen under Japanese occupation during WWII, where roughly 40,000 East Timorese were killed during the reclaiming of the land during the guerrilla war<sup>10</sup>. As such, one can contest Australia's official justification

Some commentators have defended the government in retrospect by arguing they had legitimate fears of the possible installation of a communist government by the Timorese, however, these concerns of Marxist revolution were not reasonable<sup>11</sup>. The Australian Government claimed that there was a growing risk that the left-wing Fretilin would lead to the creation of a communist state on the border of Indonesia, which could then also be used as a base for incursions by antagonistic powers

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<sup>7</sup> McCarthy, J 2020, *The myths of Australia's role in East Timorese independence*, The Strategist, viewed 26 May 2020,

<sup>8</sup> *East Timor profile - Timeline* 2018, BBC News, viewed 24 May 2020, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-14952883>>.

<sup>9</sup> East Timor: principle versus pragmatism' 2009, *Global Voices 2: historical inquiries for the 21st century*, pp. 58-59, viewed 26 May 2020

<sup>10</sup> *History of East Timor* n.d., Wikipedia, viewed 26 May 2020, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_East\\_Timor#:~:text=The%20Japanese%20occupation%20resulted%20in%20the%20deaths%20of%2040%2C000%E2%80%9370%2C000%20Timorese.>](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_East_Timor#:~:text=The%20Japanese%20occupation%20resulted%20in%20the%20deaths%20of%2040%2C000%E2%80%9370%2C000%20Timorese.>)>.

<sup>11</sup> *Companion to East Timor - The Whitlam government* n.d., UNSW Canberra, Canberra, viewed 13 July 2020, <<https://www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/school-of-humanities-and-social-sciences/timor-companion/whitlam>>.

into Indonesia, while also posing a threat towards Western submarines<sup>12</sup>. A recently unearthed handwritten document, 'Steps to Prevent Communist Agitators to Escape', shows the Indonesian Government gave a 'hit list' to their Australian counterpart. This list, containing a total of 19 people, was handed to the Australian Embassy in Jakarta in September 1975 by Harry Tjan, a Indonesian official who also revealed that Indonesia was planning to invade East Timor. It accused Fretilin leaders such as subsequent East Timorese president Dr Jose Ramos-Horta and the later prime minister Dr Mari Alkatiri of being 'communist agitators', that would be arrested by Indonesia during the invasion<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, out of the fear of a local communist power, and the risks that would have posed for both Indonesia and Australia, the invasion of East Timor was seen as necessary. However, by analysing this through a more critical lens, it becomes evident that this concern was heavily exaggerated. Firstly, as noted by political scientists Carey and Bentley, Fretilin was a social-democratic party, not communist<sup>14</sup>. James Dunn, an Australian diplomat, acting as Australia's consul in Portuguese Timor from 1962-64, supported this by stating, 'As one who was in East Timor prior to the invasion of Dili in December 1975 I would like to make it clear that communist influence in Fretilin at that time was negligible. The Fretilin leadership was essentially a nationalist movement, with only a handful having any interest in Marxism'<sup>15</sup>. This shows that the Marxist influence on the party was minimal and insignificant.

By taking a closer look at the justifications that Australia provided, a sense of doubt begins to arise surrounding the real motivation behind the inaction in East Timor. Contesting the official narrative, this essay will now argue that economic and strategic motives played a more significant role. Newly declassified documents have revealed that Australia appeared driven by a desire for oil and gas rights when it was decided to legitimise the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. Kim McGrath (academic and author of *Crossing the Line: Australia's Secret History in the Timor Sea*<sup>16</sup>), claims that the files suggest that the Federal Government had deliberately concealed the vital role that the interests in oil and gas reserves had in Australia's decision making. In addition, McGrath stated that the Australian government was 'embarrassed' to publicly reveal that the commercial negotiations about resources

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<sup>12</sup> Britannica n.d., *East Timor*, viewed 28 May 2020, <<https://www.britannica.com/place/East-Timor>>.

<sup>13</sup> Lannin, S 2015, *Australia received East Timor 'hit list' before Indonesian invasion*, ABC, viewed 3 June 2020,

<sup>14</sup> Carey, P & Carter Bentley, G 1995, *East Timor at the crossroads: the forging of a nation*, University of Hawaii Press, Hawaii.

<sup>15</sup> Dunn, J n.d., *Communist Influence in Fretilin prior to the 1975 invasion*, ETAN, viewed 27 May 2020, <<https://etan.org/et/1998/july/july29-31/29communi.htm>>.

<sup>16</sup> McGrath, Kim, *Crossing the Line: Australia's Secret History in the Timor Sea* (Melbourne: Black Inc Books, 2017)

were the key issue motivating Australia to give legitimacy and somewhat encourage Indonesia's occupation.

*'It wasn't just that we wanted to appease Indonesia for the sake of being friendly with a big neighbour. It was because we had a direct commercial interest.'*

Furthermore, McGrath said that the released documents also illustrated the government's apparent attempts to avoid backlash from the public. At the time, members of the public and some members of parliament were actively questioning and uneasy in regards to Australia's diplomacy with Indonesia. This was fuelled by the death of the Balibo 5, and the human rights abuses and mass starvation, in East Timor, which peaked in 1978<sup>17</sup>. In addition, there was an extreme suppression of culture under the occupation of Indonesia. For example, while previously speaking mainly Portuguese and Tetum (Indigenous language), the East Timorese were forced to learn and speak Bahasa Indonesia rather than their own native language<sup>18</sup>. This suppression of the local languages was then carried on further, even after the shift to independence from Indonesia<sup>19</sup>. As of 2007, despite government attempts to push the use of Portuguese as an official language, Indonesian remains the main language of instruction in secondary schools and universities<sup>20</sup>. In particular, the Communist Party of Australia and East Timorese living in Australia worked together to protest against the issue of the abuse of human rights, the suppression of culture and for the independence of East Timor.

Australia framed their decision as not motivated by prioritising diplomatic ties with either Jakarta and East Timor, however through recently obtained cables between Australia and Indonesia, it becomes clear that Australia had a strong strategic preference towards Indonesia<sup>21</sup>. The justification provided covertly by diplomatic strategists in the Department of Foreign Affairs was that Indonesia

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<sup>17</sup> Davidson, H 2018, *Oil and gas had hidden role in Australia's response to Indonesian invasion of Timor-Leste*, The Guardian, viewed 27 May 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/may/07/oil-and-gas-had-hidden-role-in-australias-response-to-indonesian-invasion-of-timor-leste>>.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, John G. *Indonesia's forgotten war: The hidden history of East Timor*. Zed books, 1991.

<sup>19</sup> Jolliffe, Jill. *East Timor: nationalism and colonialism*. St. Lucia, Q.: University of Queensland Press, 1978, Chapter 1.

<sup>20</sup> Pathoni, A 2007, *East Timor drowns in language soup*, Reuters, viewed 29 May 2020, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-timor-language/east-timor-drowns-in-language-soup-idUSJAK30809020070422>>.

<sup>21</sup> Bennett, J 2013, *New evidence suggests Australia was warned about humanitarian crisis in East Timor and failed to act*, ABC, viewed 29 May 2020, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-03/new-evidence-suggests-australia-failed-to-act-soon-enough-to-he/4996412>>.

was one of their largest nations in the region and a much more significant economic partner<sup>22</sup>. It was therefore, in Australia's best interest politically and strategically to appease Indonesia, by not militarily or diplomatically opposing their intervention into East Timor. Diplomatic cables sent and received by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs between 1974 and 1976 confirm that Jakarta had pressed Australia about their desire to annex East Timor and Australia had tacitly approved their intention, showing that Australia's decision of inaction was made well before the invasion even began<sup>23</sup>. This illustrates that Australia was more motivated by the economic and political safety of allowing Indonesia to invade East Timor, as it would have been easier to do business due to the existing trading ties with the larger and more powerful state, Indonesia.

None of the arguments advanced by Australian political and diplomatic elite justify our inaction during the invasion. As it was already stated, Australia was aware of Indonesia's plan to invade East Timor<sup>24</sup>. Within days the Indonesian army invaded the land, some 30 percent of the population was slaughtered. This violence and abuse of human rights would remain the hallmark of the occupation until 1999 when the United Nations became involved in an attempt to reinstate peace and sovereignty<sup>25</sup>. The contested history surrounding Australia's inaction during the annexation of East Timor is confronting, however it must be told truthfully. The logically incoherent justifications for invasion provided by both the Australian and Indonesian governments conceal the controversial reality of Australia being driven by a desire for oil and gas, in addition to merely wanting to side with the more powerful state.

**Word Count: 1964**

#### **ANNOTATED SOURCES:**

Davidson, H 2018, *Oil and gas had hidden role in Australia's response to Indonesian invasion of Timor-Leste*, The Guardian, viewed 27 May 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/may/07/oil-and-gas-had-hidden-role-in-australias-response-to-indonesian-invasion-of-timor-leste>>.

Helen Davidson 2018 *Guardian* article "Oil and Gas had a hidden role in Australia's response to Indonesian invasion of Timor-Leste" explores the role of resources in Australia-East Timor foreign policy. This source usefully contested the official or established reason for Australia's inaction during the 1975 invasion. The article was incorporated in the fourth main body paragraph, which was used to argue

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<sup>22</sup> Daley, P 2019, *Australia's history with East Timor isn't pretty but it must be told truthfully*, The Guardian, viewed 26 May 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2019/nov/13/australias-history-with-east-timor-isnt-pretty-but-it-must-be-told-truthfully>>.

<sup>23</sup> Hopkins, A 2000, *Australia let Indonesia invade East Timor in 1975*, The Guardian, Canberra, viewed 25 May 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/sep/13/indonesia.easttimor>>.

<sup>24</sup> Hopkins, A 2000, *Australia let Indonesia invade East Timor in 1975*, The Guardian, Canberra, viewed 25 May 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/sep/13/indonesia.easttimor>>.

<sup>25</sup> Shaefer, M n.d., *Timor-Leste*, Freedom International, Florida, viewed 27 May 2020, <<https://www.freedommag.org/issue/201410-created-equal/world/fighting-for-human-rights-timor-leste.html>>.

against Australia's supposed justification, proving that true incentive being the rich natural oil supplies in the area. Although the Guardian is somewhat of a left-leaning news source, it still proves to be quite a reliable source with Davidson being one of the leading reporters on Asian Pacific issues and politics, especially in the area of Timor-Lester and Papua New Guinea.

Klar, N 1993, *Essay: An evaluation of Gough Whitlam's response to Indonesian claims to East Timor.*, The Klar Books Site, viewed 26 May 2020, <<http://klarbooks.com/academic/timor.html>>.

Klar's historical essay aimed to critically evaluate Gough Whitlam's response to the Indonesian takeover. Although the paper was written in 1993, meaning that it could not consider or evaluate the more recent events of East Timor's independence, it still is a highly reliable academic perspective and provided valuable analysis to disprove the provided justifications and insight in regards to the more probable true motivations. This was especially useful in refuting the argument in the first body paragraph, in regard to the possibility of separation movements in the Pacific.

Lannin, S 2015, *Australia received East Timor 'hit list' before Indonesian invasion*, ABC, viewed 3 June 2020, <<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/australian-received-east-timor-hit-list/6979268>>

Sue Lannin's article exposed the 'hit list' of senior East Timorese politicians and activists given to the Australian Embassy by Indonesia and reveals the degree to which Australia knew in advance and the intended brutal nature of the invasion. In addition to this, it introduced a vital argument against the risk of a communist government being installed, with the integration of James Dunn's perspective. This secondary source proves to be extremely reliable with Lannin, being one of the leading reporters in the Asia Pacific region for the ABC, being one of the most reliable Australian media networks, while also quoting James Dunn, a renowned academic expert in Asia-Pacific relations.

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<[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_East\\_Timor#:~:text=The%20Japanese%20occupation%20resulted%20in%20the%20deaths%20of%2040%2C000%E2%80%9370%2C000%20Timorese.>](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_East_Timor#:~:text=The%20Japanese%20occupation%20resulted%20in%20the%20deaths%20of%2040%2C000%E2%80%9370%2C000%20Timorese.>).

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