

Creating a flexible regional foreign policy for Australia: learning from the lessons of East Timor

Workshop report, Session VII

Facilitator: Kel Dummett (Australia West Papua Association-Melbourne & RMIT University)

Asia-Pacific Mediation Forum Conference, Adelaide, 29 November – 1 December 2001

Introduction

In recent years the Australian government has been forced to open its eyes to what is happening in our immediate region, in the Pacific as well as South East Asia. In the past foreign policy has given the impression that the Pacific doesn't exist, preferring to direct its attention over the top of the Pacific to Asia, or even further a field to Europe the Americas and the Middle East. Now analysts talk of the 'arc of instability' when describing the Pacific region, with conflicts and potential conflicts in PNG, Bougainville, Fiji, Solomons and West Papua (Irian Jaya).

Australia must take the lead role as a mediator of conflict in the Asia-Pacific region. To be an effective mediator, and encourage peaceful solutions to conflicts in the region, Australia must have foreign policies that are sustainable over the long term, that can respond to changing circumstances and that respect human rights. These were sadly all absent from our policy regarding East Timor. Instead, Australia locked itself into the untenable position of absolute support of Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor.

This 24-year flawed East Timor policy, resulted not only in the deaths of thousands of Timorese, but also destroyed our close relationship with Indonesia. Many in the Indonesian government saw Australia's sudden policy reversal from that of total support of Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor and of turning a blind eye to military (TNI) and militia atrocities, to calling for and leading an armed intervention force, as a betrayal.

Numerous writers have written about the failings of Australia's Indonesia policy, particularly regarding East Timor. John Birmingham¹ has described it as *appeasement, lacking in authentic and widespread domestic support and unsustainable*. He also describes the culture of the Australian foreign service, responsible for developing these policies and advising governments, as rigid and hierarchical and *vulnerable to capture by their own mythologies*, with standard practices of *retreating into tunnel vision, the denial of truth [and] refusal to plan for worse case scenarios...*.

I propose that Australia has not learned from the lessons of East Timor, in fact, many in DFAT and in this and former governments, still refuse to admit they and Australia's policies, were wrong. Gareth Evans has only very recently acknowledged his errors: *I am one of those who has to acknowledge, as Australia's foreign minister at the time, that many of our earlier training efforts [of Indonesian military officers] helped to produce more professional human rights abusers.*²

Australia's Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, however, has refused to admit that DFAT and he knew months before hand, that Indonesian generals and some government officials, were planning to destroy East Timor if the referendum vote went in favour of independence. This is despite the fact that their prior knowledge of the atrocities was exposed on national television by the brave Australian Army whistleblower, Captain Plunkett.

Further, the Government still refuses to make public, intelligence information that identifies key TNI and government personnel involved in planning the rape of Timor. It also refuses to support calls for international war-crimes tribunal investigations into the East Timor atrocities.

Even more concerning is the fact that the Government has not learned from the mistakes of East Timor, and is committing the exact same errors in relation to our response to the 40 year struggle for justice and self-determination in West Papua (Irian Jaya). Birmingham asks whether the hard significance of the East Timor lesson is causing *many sleepless nights for Foreign Affairs staff* responsible for West Papuan policy.

Our foreign policy position is equally as rigid in its recognition and support of Indonesian sovereignty over West Papua – *Australia made a pragmatic decision a long time ago that it has no choice but to support Indonesia's sovereignty in West New Guinea (West Papua), and this will not change* (my emphasis).³

Indeed the same comments that were being made by our leaders in the lead up to the devastation of East Timor, are being repeated now regarding West Papua. What our leaders fail to realize is that 'independence movements don't go away', regardless of what Australian or Indonesian politicians say, West Papua will become independent – it's not a question of 'if' but of 'when and how'. In a recent visit to Australia, the US State Departments policy director, Mr Richard Haas acknowledged this when he said *Jakarta will ultimately have to accommodate at least some provincial ambitions for self-government*.⁴

Australia's Indonesia policy needs to respect Indonesian sovereignty, but also recognize Papuan's right to a genuine act of self-determination. The Age in an Editorial on 14 November 2001 stated that *there is a middle way, in which Australia quietly holds its ground over issues that matter, but handles mutual differences sensitively*.

[The combined Papuan churches estimate that 400, 000 people have died or disappeared since Indonesia invaded West Papua in 1961 - and the military led violence and intimidation continues to today. Indonesia Kopassus troops are believed responsible for the assassination of the senior leader Chief Theys Eluay on 11th November 2001.]

¹ Birmingham, John (2001) *Appeasing Jakarta: Australia's complicity in the East Timor tragedy*. Black Inc, Melbourne

² Evans, Gareth *Indonesia: My Mistake*. Article in International Herald Tribune, July 2001 (Reprinted in SMH)

³ Parliament of Australia (2000) *Is West Papua Another Timor?* Parliamentary Briefing Paper 2000, No 1.

⁴ MacDonald, Hamish, *US and Australia war on suppression of separatist*. Article, Sydney Morning Herald, 30 June 2001

The workshop

A facilitated dialogue followed in which the following three questions were discussed:

1. What were/are the key faults with Australia's Indonesia policy?
2. What would a workable policy look like?
3. How can this be achieved? (a. What are the barriers? b. How can they be overcome?)

The following points were raised during the brainstorm of the questions

1. Australia's Indonesia policy:

- is too rigid
- lacks transparency
- is reactive not proactive
- is dominated by a framework of existing strategic alliances, especially with the United States
- is not reflective of the broader Australian community
- has underlying hidden agendas
- is based on misinformation and lies
- promotes fear - concept of Indonesia as military threat
- doesn't exist.

2. A workable policy would:

- be based on 'cornerstones' broadly supported by the Australian community
- recognize basic human rights
- reflect International Conventions that Australia has ratified, eg the right to self-determination
- permit broad recognition of Indonesian nation, but not necessarily all states it lays claim to
- have consistency of principles but its application must be able to change when circumstances change
- avoid locking Australia into untenable positions
- be worded in such a way that it has a 'neutral state' that avoids the embarrassing backflips.

3. Making it happen

a. The barriers to change:

- Australia's culture – colonial history, fear of 'other', white Anglo
- policy is not transparent
- lack of community awareness
- economic relationships/issues
- corporations operating in Indonesia, especially in resource extraction
- media attitudes

b. Overcoming barriers:

- more accurate information to community education
- raise importance of foreign policy activism
- Government needs to be more responsive, and set up consultative process
- Cultural sensitivity.

Kel Dummett is a full-time PhD student at RMIT University, Melbourne. He has been a teacher at secondary and tertiary levels, worked at remote Aboriginal communities, been an elected councillor for a Sydney council and worked as an environmental manager. He has been an active peace, environment and social justice campaigner for more than 20 years. For the last 10 years he has been an active member of the Australia West Papua Association.