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Strained Relations With Our Newest Neighbour

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Australia regularly calls on other countries to abide by international laws and norms to settle disputes. On whaling, on the settling of international trade disputes, and in the 1970s on French nuclear testing, we insist others play by the rules.

The rules-based international order has brought so much benefit to our country, and we should act to maintain and support that system.

On the overlapping maritime claims in the South China Sea, we urge all parties to abide by both the terms and the spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

We are not disinterested observers to the [evolving tensions in the South China Sea](#).

One-third of the world's shipping, and 60 percent of our own exports, transit through these waters. In dollar terms, nearly US\$5.3 trillion in total trade passes through the South China Sea each year. We have a national interest in defending freedom of navigation -- and in upholding the international system of laws and accepted behaviours.

If we want to insist that other nations play by the rules, we also need to adhere to them.

Australia has a good record of acting in defence of this system, but not a flawless one. Timor-Leste suffered decades of war and starvation before gaining independence. Australia played a key role in securing that independence -- a proud moment for our nation. But the [maritime boundary dispute](#) has strained relations with our newest neighbour.

Australia's unwillingness to commit to maritime border negotiations with Timor-Leste has raised valid questions about our commitment to a rules-based international system and to being a good global citizen.

This must change.

Labor in Government will immediately commence discussions on a voluntary, binding international resolution for a permanent maritime boundary between Australia and Timor-Leste. It is in the national interest of both countries that we do so. And importantly, by committing to freely participating in it, Labor's proposal is in the interests of the international system itself.

We are seeking to end more than 40 years of uncertainty over a maritime border, and committing to international norms that we expect others to follow. Through bilateral negotiation, or if necessary, with the assistance of the International Court of Justice or a binding international arbitration, we want to fairly and finally settle this matter.

This is a top-of-mind issue for the people of Timor-Leste. They are disappointed that a country that supported them so greatly in their struggle for independence has, in their view, delayed coming to the negotiating table on sea boundaries.

Respecting the international rule of law, including UNCLOS, must inform the basis of our discussions with Timor-Leste about the future of the Timor Sea. Only this way will we be able to deliver border security and economic certainty for both Timor-Leste and Australia.

When I met Minister Xanana Gusmao in March 2015, he did not ask for charity for Timor-Leste -- he asked for fairness. That is what Labor's proposal is about.

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