

Australia should commit to dispute resolution with Timor-Leste

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The Turnbull's government rejection of an international commission's jurisdiction over the maritime boundary dispute with Timor-Leste is a deeply disappointing development.

Timor-Leste suffered decades of conflict and suffering before gaining independence. The key role played by Australia in securing that independence and protecting Timor-Leste's fragile security and democracy is a very proud moment for our nation.



But it's now undeniable that the maritime boundary dispute has strained our bilateral relations.

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

Whether it be our whaling disputes with Japan, international trade disputes with the US and EU, our fight to halt French nuclear testing in the Pacific, or Antarctic claims in the 1980s, Australia encourages others to play by the rules, and we benefit from the rules-based system that incentivises them to do so.

This is the position we are now taking on the overlapping maritime claims in the South China Sea, where we have urged all parties to abide by both the terms and the spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

There is bipartisan agreement that it is in Australia's national interest to uphold the international system of laws and accepted behaviours when it comes to the South China Sea, just as it is in every other aspect of international law.

Labor is committed to multilateralism and a rules-based international system. We believe all nations benefit from abiding by international norms. If we want to insist that other nations play by the rules, we would adhere to them.

That's why Labor committed in February this year to reaching a binding international resolution with Timor-Leste, whether it be through bilateral negotiation or international arbitration.

Unfortunately, the Turnbull government is sending worrying, mixed signals about the dispute with Timor-Leste which threatens to undermine our international standing.

Last week, in a statement to the ABC, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said: 'As with the ruling in the Philippines arbitration case, we consider the decision of the upcoming compulsory conciliation binding on both sides.'

But more recently, in a joint media release the Foreign Minister and the Attorney-General declared that while 'Australia will abide by the Commission's finding as to whether it has jurisdiction to hear matters on maritime boundaries', if the commission finds that it does have jurisdiction 'then its final report on that matter is not binding.'

The Turnbull government's equivocation on this issue does not strengthen Australia's ability to advocate for a rules-based system or our reputation in the region.

The Turnbull government should stop delaying and commit to an international process of dispute resolution. There has now been more than 40 years of uncertainty over this maritime border. The settlement of this dispute in fair and permanent terms is long overdue.