

How Australia trashed its legacy in Timor-Leste

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It's almost 20 years since Australia led peacekeepers into the country but our true relationship is one threaded with manipulation, deception, bullying and greed.



Twenty years ago this September, the Australian-led international peacekeeping forces known as INTERFET touched down on the scorched-bare sands of newly-independent Timor-Leste: a country mere days into a hard-won and blood-soaked independence from Indonesia, and one desperately in need of help.

We were there and we were ready. Australia led what eventually became a peacekeeping force of 11,000 people from 22 nations; one which was considered an unmitigated success. John Howard calls the intervention a “significant foreign policy triumph” and has said he [wouldn't change a thing](#) about it, and Indonesian soldiers withdrew completely by the end of October. Australian defence personnel were properly lauded for their efforts.

But INTERFET is just one small part of Australia's story with Timor-Leste. And, in a tale threaded with manipulation, deception, bullying and greed, INTERFET is not the centrepiece we'd like to believe — in fact, its legacy is an outlier. Our true Timor-Leste story starts years before then-major-general Peter Cosgrove led his soldiers into the sticky Dili heat to help build a new country.

Back to 1999

After more than 78% of Timorese people voted for independence in a referendum on August 30, 1999, furious pro-Indonesian paramilitary militias responded with violence — systematically razing towns, burning buildings, and attacking and killing people. Around 1500 Timorese citizens are [thought to have died](#) in the violence, tens of thousands fled their homes to the mountains, and Indonesian troops forced more than 300,000 people over the land border to West Timor.

International outcry forced the establishment of INTERFET. Australia — a key player in the decision to intervene — reversed a decade of ambivalent foreign policy that had preferred to forget about the Timor-Leste problem and stepped in.

There's no question that INTERFET did good work. But Australia's decision to go to Timor-Leste wasn't quite the principled act of a country hell-bent on securing its fledgling neighbour's sovereignty.

The oil story

Just two months before Timor-Leste's full independence was restored, Australia withdrew its recognition of the International Court of Justice's jurisdiction to settle maritime boundary disputes: the exact type of discussion an independent Timor-Leste would need to raise about the lucrative oil and gas reserves buried deep within the Timor Sea.

Free from the independent adjudicator's eye, Australia took a bullish approach in negotiations over the Timor Sea's multi-billion-dollar oil and gas wealth, as it had with a more acquiescent Indonesia in the 1960s (and whose 1975 invasion of Timor-Leste we ignored as tacit trade-off for resource-sharing).

Negotiations resulted in a handful of treaties for using resources, but crucially, no permanent boundary. Australia wanted to avoid drawing a boundary because we knew we were claiming resources that simply weren't ours to take, which a boundary would immediately — and rightfully — allocate to Timor-Leste. And, in sidestepping the umpire, we'd created a plan to get away with it.

Only, we were foiled.

In 2012, the former ASIS intelligence officer known as Witness K sensationally revealed that Australia had bugged Timor-Leste's rooms in order to gain the upper hand during those tense negotiations. Under the guise of aid-funded building refurbishment, we sent in engineers to install listening devices which fed us the information we needed to skew negotiations our way.

Timor-Leste tore up the lopsided "Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea" (CMATS) agreement and took Australia to the Hague for conciliation — a process which would eventually draw a historic, permanent maritime boundary across the middle of the Timor Sea, placing almost all of the area's highly valuable resources on Timor-Leste's side.

In public, we hailed the "landmark" agreement. In private, we organised to prosecute the men who told the truth: Witness K and his lawyer Bernard Collaery now face charges.

Timor-Leste's prime minister at the time, Mari Alkatiri, called the bugging a "crime", to which Alexander Downer responded by accusing Timor-Leste of calling us bullies. Which was a mistake, [the minister said](#), "when you consider all we've done for East Timor".

Our earlier assistance, according to Downer, licensed us to treat Timor-Leste how we wanted after INTERFET troops left. This included forcing acquiescence to our oil theft.

Return to Dili

Now, Scott Morrison and Cosgrove will be receiving their invitations to the spectacle of Timor-Leste's referendum day celebrations (it's rumoured 100 heads of state are invited). They'll be welcomed warmly in Dili, arrive keen to valorise the INTERFET assistance, and to reinforce Australia's role as Timor-Leste's largest foreign aid donor; on paper, a close neighbour keen to see the nation thrive.

But Witness K and Collaery are trapped in [protracted](#) and obfuscated legal proceedings with jail time hanging over their heads. That bitterly-won boundary treaty remains unratified by our parliament, and until it is, we continue to rake in millions of dollars per month from the Timor Sea that we've already agreed don't belong to us. Conservatively [estimated](#) at \$60 million, the amount we've taken may rival the \$95.7 million in foreign aid we've pledged to Timor-Leste between 2018 and 2019.

At the signing of the boundary treaty in March last year, Julie Bishop hailed a "new chapter" in the bilateral relationship. She was right: we've turned over the page of INTERFET glory, and now see just a sorry tale of stealing wealth, spying on friends and prosecuting those who dare to tell the truth.