

## **Lest Timor forget, we have our national interests too**

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**AUSTRALIA'S role in supporting the transition of East Timor, or Timor Leste, to independence in 2002 - making it the first new sovereign state of the 21st century - was pivotal.**

The promise of a new century was embraced by the Timorese who, over the previous 100 years, had endured a turbulent and bloody journey through Portuguese rule, Japanese occupation, decolonisation and the 1975 Indonesian annexation before a UN-supervised ballot for independence in 1999.

Controversially (and some would say prematurely), Australian diplomacy helped precipitate the independence ballot. Whatever the missteps, the people gave voice to their will. When Indonesian-aligned militia reacted with violence and deadly force, Australian troops put their lives on the line to keep the peace. Our troops remained until early this year and our support continues through a generous civilian aid program.

This legacy does not give Australia a leave pass to trample on East Timor's rights, but any differences between our nations need to be considered against this co-operative history. This poor nation of little more than a million people is a predominantly Catholic outpost, with a post-colonial political history steeped in the communist revolutionary spirit of South and Central America.

Yet it is steadily developing economic, diplomatic and cultural relationships in its immediate region with the likes of Australia and its former occupier, Indonesia, as well as further afield with other lusophone (Portuguese-speaking) nations such as Brazil and Mozambique. The vast oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea are an economic resource of immense importance not only to East Timor but also to Australia and Indonesia. Negotiations over permanent maritime boundaries were fraught enough before the emergence of the new nation complicated the treaty process. The governments of each country are duty bound to extract the maximum rightful benefit for their populations.

So the long-running negotiations over the Greater Sunrise field between East Timor and Australia pit each nation against the other. Just as East Timor's economic future is at stake, so too are tens of billions of dollars for Australia. Yet in the joint area the revenue split is a generous 90/10 in East Timor's favour.

Regardless of current specific spying allegations and their veracity, it would be extraordinary to think that any government would not seek to obtain as much information as possible on such a crucial matter of sovereignty. We, unsurprisingly, expect Canberra to work towards our national interest.

We should no more give away our gas than our land. Timorese insistence that gas is piped onshore to boost investment, revenue and employment is unrealistic. Investors need to make decisions on commercial grounds and floating LNG platforms now seem likely. Without Australian support and investment, it is unlikely these resources would be developed at all. East Timor would be best served to pursue the project under the generous terms negotiated, rather than join with international activists to pursue politically motivated grievances against their Australian neighbours and partners. Meanwhile, our intelligence and security agencies are obliged to do what they can within the law to protect our nation's interests.