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East Timor and the “Slippery Slope” Problem

by Leon T. Hadar

Executive Summary

Domestic and international pressure on Washington to use U.S. military power to resolve the recent crisis in East Timor points to the dangers involved in adopting the Clinton Doctrine as a guide for U.S. foreign policy. The Clinton Doctrine holds that the United States and the “international community” have an obligation to violate the principle of state sovereignty to protect the rights of a persecuted minority. Expectations that the United States would be ready to “do something,” including applying its military might, to help bring an end to ethnic strife in East Timor encouraged Australia to lobby for an international intervention. Canberra assumed that Washington would be willing to pay the costs of resolving the East Timor crisis, and thus produce a rerun of the U.S.-led interventions in the Balkans.

Fortunately, the United States resisted that pressure and, as a result, created incentives for Australia and other regional players to assume the main burden of restoring order on the island and maintaining stability in the Southeast Asian neighborhood. Yet even the limited support role the United States has undertaken in the peacekeeping operation in East Timor could gradually lead to wider and more dangerous American military and diplomatic commitments. Already, the number of U.S. military personnel involved is more than twice the original estimate. The United States could also find itself becoming the “stabilizer of last resort” on the Indonesian archipelago at a time when an unstable central government in Jakarta is trying to contain secessionist rebellions in other provinces.

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Introduction

In March 1999 Indonesia and Portugal reached an agreement to let the people of East Timor take part in a “direct vote,” sanctioned and monitored by the United Nations, that would allow the residents of the eastern half of the small island to decide whether they wanted it to remain an autonomous province under Indonesian sovereignty or become independent.¹ Despite rising violence perpetrated by pro-Indonesia paramilitary militias and pro-independence guerrillas after Indonesian President B. J. Habibie announced that he would hold the referendum, about 98.6 percent of East Timor’s registered voters went to the polls on August 30. Within five days, UN monitors counted and verified the 450,000 ballots and announced that 78.5 percent of the voters had opted for independence. The overwhelming vote in favor of secession triggered a massive upsurge of violence by the pro-Indonesia militias. Their forces attacked supporters of independence as well as foreign diplomats and journalists, leaving hundreds, perhaps thousands, dead and forcing more than a quarter of the East Timorese people to flee their homes.²

The chaos and bloodshed in East Timor, and the indications that some elements in the Indonesian military had colluded with the anti-independence militias, ignited international criticism, and the UN called on Jakarta to allow the deployment of peacekeeping troops in the province to help establish order. Australia expressed its readiness to lead a peacekeeping operation and asked the United States to contribute ground troops to the mission.³ After intense pressure from the UN—as well as the United States, which suspended ties with the Indonesian military—Habibie announced that his government would accept UN peacekeepers but expressed reservations about assigning Australia to lead the operation. At the same time, the Clinton administration said that it would not send U.S. “combat troops,” as Australia had

requested, but would provide logistical support to handle transportation, including planes and pilots for an airlift, communications, and intelligence.⁴

Although a massive, U.S.-led mission (as in Bosnia and Kosovo) in East Timor is unlikely, there is still a danger that the limited U.S. financial and logistical support for UN peacekeeping forces could gradually lead to more extensive U.S. diplomatic and military commitments. The United States could become a “stabilizer of last resort” in the Indonesian archipelago while Jakarta attempted to cope with secessionist rebellions in its provinces of Aceh and Irian Jaya and with pressure for autonomy in other provinces.

Another Kosovo?

Dramatic images of Timorese fleeing for their lives and of Indonesian military and police forces contributing to the escalating violence were carried around the Global Village by the international media. Those images brought about harsh condemnation by the UN and various governments, including that of the United States, and created momentum for a UN-sanctioned intervention in East Timor that seemed at times like a rerun of the Kosovo scenario. “The Next Kosovo?” asked an editorial in the pro-interventionist *Wall Street Journal*, which noted “the pleas for outside intervention [in East Timor] without Jakarta’s permission.”⁵ “Moral hypocrisy over East Timor,” was the headline to a piece by Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine, who asked, “Do we only intervene when human rights of white people are being violated?” The decision on whether to intervene in East Timor would be “a clear moral test for the international community and especially for the NATO allies who just intervened in Kosovo,” he stated.⁶ “Is this Kosovo all over again?” asked the *Christian Science Monitor*, describing the crisis in East Timor as “Kosovo East” and calling on the UN to intervene there.⁷ “After all, the lesson

of Kosovo was supposedly that the international community can't sit on its hands in the face of slaughter," explained *Time*.⁸

Those and other assessments reflected the Zeitgeist of the Western political and media elites, stressing the parallels between Kosovo and East Timor and suggesting that, if the Clinton Doctrine has truly become the guide for post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy, Washington will have to apply it around the world—in Indonesia as readily as in Yugoslavia. The Clinton Doctrine was enunciated by the president during the war in Kosovo and, according to him and his aides, marked a new era in which the United States would lead the international community in a campaign to end ethnic cleansing, prevent crimes against humanity, and bring the perpetrators of such crimes to justice. As Clinton explained after the war in Kosovo: "I think there's an important principle here that I hope will be upheld in the future, . . . [that if the] world community has the power to stop it, we ought to stop genocide and ethnic cleansing." The president stressed that "innocent civilians ought not to be subject to slaughter because of their religious or tribal heritage." Clinton also offered a mea culpa, conceding that the United States and the UN had failed to halt genocide in Rwanda—where more than 800,000 ethnic Tutsis were slain in 1994—and indicated that he would not let such slaughter go unopposed again.⁹ The Clinton Doctrine seemed to create a new standard in international relations: "No state [is] allowed to commit gross human rights violations even on its own territory." That suggests that the United States and the international community have the right, indeed the obligation, to violate the principle of state sovereignty to protect the human rights of a persecuted ethnic or religious minority.¹⁰

The Truman Doctrine, which laid the strategic rationale (containing Soviet expansionism) for U.S. military support for beleaguered anti-communist regimes in Greece and Turkey after World War II, inevitably created the expectation that Washington would use its power for the same purposes else-

where in the world. The United States frequently did so throughout the Cold War. U.S. military intervention in Kosovo, and the underlying humanitarian rationale, seemed to have a similar effect. Members of the foreign policy establishment now routinely cite Kosovo as a standard against which to test whether and when the United States should deploy its troops abroad. That explains the knee-jerk reaction of editorial page writers and television talk show hosts who argued that the international community, the West, and, of course, the World's Only Remaining Superpower must "do something" to stop the tribal violence in East Timor in the same way that they had moved to end ethnic cleansing in Kosovo just three months earlier.

A radical departure from U.S. foreign policy norms—as well as from recognized international legal principles—now has been enshrined as the normal approach to world affairs. Opponents of such a revolutionary doctrine are pressured to explain their reluctance to violate the principle of state sovereignty in order to protect human rights—to explain why, since U.S. forces bombed Belgrade, they should not also bomb Jakarta. Even people who rejected the idea of sending U.S. combat troops to East Timor tended to accept the legitimacy of the intervention in Kosovo (and the Clinton Doctrine as the proper standard) and merely sought to explain why the circumstances in East Timor were different. Some argued that the Clinton Doctrine should not be applied to Southeast Asia because, unlike Europe, that region lacks a U.S.-led regional security system. Conversely, advocates of intervention invoked the Kosovo analogy to argue that intervention in East Timor was based on even stronger legal grounds. After all, Kosovo was legally part of Yugoslavia, whereas East Timor had been illegally occupied by Indonesia since the invasion and conquest in 1975.¹¹

There was a sense of déjà vu as the United States came under pressure from academics, the media, human rights organizations, several UN Security Council members, key East

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Asian allies, and other interested parties to use military force to resolve another internal dispute in a sovereign nation. The government of Australia played a leading role in mobilizing support for UN intervention in East Timor and offered to head an international effort to restore order there.¹² Portugal, East Timor's former colonial ruler, was another cheerleader for intervention. "Where is the dignity of the Security Council members?" asked the Portuguese diplomatic emissary to Indonesia, Ana Gomes.¹³ And leaders of the East Timorese community called on the UN and the West not to abandon their people to the Indonesian gunmen. "What is the West doing—the West that went to Serbia, bombed Serbia back to the Stone Age in the name of human rights to prevent ethnic cleansing?" asked Jose Ramos-Horta, one of the leaders of the East Timorese independence movement and cowinner of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize, in an address at the National Press Club in Washington.¹⁴ Another East Timorese political figure, Constancio Pinto, the representative of the National Council of East Timorese Resistance to the United Nations and North America, told *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* that his organization expected the UN to deploy no fewer than 50,000 to 60,000 peacekeeping troops in East Timor.¹⁵

The Administration's Reluctance to Implement the Clinton Doctrine in Indonesia

The United States had provided some financial support for the UN mission in East Timor, including money that Congress allocated for "assistance and election monitoring." Washington decided, among other things, to send 30 American police personnel as part of a force of 280 foreign police and to contribute three U.S. military officers to the international military liaison groups to help provide security during the elections.¹⁶ The

Clinton administration's initial reaction to the postelection chaos in East Timor raised the expectation that Washington was about to "do something" to prove to the international community that the Clinton Doctrine was not just an elegant label for an ad hoc intervention in Kosovo—that the doctrine would be applied universally. Indeed, by describing the situation in East Timor as a "humanitarian disaster," the U.S. Department of State seemed to be using the same terminology it had employed to characterize conditions in Kosovo on the eve of the American-led intervention there, raising the prospect that the United States would attempt to use its diplomatic and military power to avert a similar "ethnic cleansing" in Indonesia.¹⁷

Notwithstanding the earlier statement by the State Department (and the implied threat by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who during a visit to Hanoi suggested that Indonesia had to deal with the violence in West Timor or "let the international community help"), officials in Washington acted swiftly to lower the expectations that the United States would lead a peacekeeping mission to East Timor.¹⁸ There were even intimations that the strategic importance of America's ties with Indonesia would outweigh humanitarian concerns for the plight of the East Timorese. In fact, the administration rejected proposals to impose economic sanctions on Indonesia to punish it for its failure to restore order in East Timor. The Pentagon assumed a lead role in formulating policy toward the crisis, emphasizing the need to use the longstanding ties between the United States and the Indonesian military to encourage General Wiranto, the head of the country's armed forces, to impose order in East Timor. Pentagon officials also sought to condition any deployment of international peacekeeping troops on a green light from the Indonesian government and military.¹⁹ Indeed, according to journalist Allan Nairn, Adm. Dennis Blair, commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific, disregarded his instructions when he was sent in April 1999

to meet with General Wiranto and inform him that Washington wanted him to bring an end to the violence perpetrated by the militias and some elements of the military. Instead, according to Nairn's sources, "Admiral Blair at no point told Wiranto to stop the militia operation, going the other way by inviting him to be his guest in Hawaii" and indicating that the United States wanted to strengthen its military ties with Indonesia. Indonesian military officers were "delighted by the meeting" and "took this as a green light to proceed with the militia operation" in East Timor.²⁰

Moreover, the Pentagon seemed to veto any idea of sending a large U.S. military contingent to East Timor. Secretary of Defense William Cohen said, "We have to be selective where we commit forces and, under the circumstances [East Timor] is not an area we are prepared to commit forces." The United States "cannot and should not be viewed as the policeman of the world," stressed Cohen, adding that the administration was "not planning on any insertion of peacekeeping forces."²¹ "If you look at East Timor by itself, I cannot see any national interest there that would be overwhelming, that would call for us to deploy or place U.S. forces on the ground in that area," said Gen. Henry H. Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during congressional hearings.²² Any foreign military intervention "should be led by the Asians," explained Samuel Berger, President Clinton's national security adviser. The United States should provide only "material support" for such an operation.²³

On the eve of his departure to the Leaders Summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Auckland, New Zealand, President Clinton seemed to talk tough on East Timor. He announced the suspension of military-to-military ties with the Indonesian military, warned that U.S. economic assistance to Indonesia depended on the outcome of the East Timor crisis, and called on Jakarta to accept UN peacekeeping troops to restore order.²⁴ However, Congress had already curtailed most tactical military

training programs in 1991, after the Indonesian military's involvement in the massacre of independence activists in the East Timor capital, Dili.²⁵ After the Indonesian government agreed to allow the deployment of UN troops in East Timor, the United States adopted a cautious middle position. Administration spokesmen announced that the United States would not send combat troops but agreed that the peacekeeping operation would require some U.S. presence on the ground to handle transportation, communications, and intelligence.²⁶

A Sense of Relief May Be Premature

The statements of and the relatively cautious actions taken by administration officials might offer at least limited comfort to opponents of intervention. Administration leaders conveyed the impression that the United States would not be intervening directly in the East Timor conflict, emphasizing that Washington does not have a "plan" to do that. But critics should recall that similar statements and pronouncements were made by Bush and Clinton administration officials during the early stages of the civil war in Yugoslavia. They repeatedly expressed reluctance to involve U.S. troops in the conflict and encouraged the European countries to play the lead role in resolving it. Yet the combination of television images, maneuvers by pro-intervention forces in the bureaucracy, pressure from political and media elites, and lobbying by interested foreign players produced "diplomatic creep"—each escalation of violence triggered increased U.S. involvement—and led to the military interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Indeed, as the evolution of U.S. goals and policies in Yugoslavia demonstrates, foreign policy choices are not always a result of grand strategic designs; they are more often than not the outcome of "muddling through." That is especially true during periods when

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the government and political elites do not share a coherent conception of the nation's foreign policy interests and goals and the president fails to exert strong leadership over decisionmaking. Under those conditions, an administration comes under pressure from domestic and foreign players to change policy objectives and conduct to suit parochial agendas. That is clearly the environment in which U.S. foreign policy is currently being made. The hollow "victory" in Kosovo and the articulation of the Clinton Doctrine have not changed that reality; indeed, those events have reinforced it.

Thus, one cannot dismiss the potential for a gradual escalation of the commitment to intervene in the evolving crisis in Indonesia. After all, the U.S. decision to play a more active military (air bombardment) and diplomatic (mediating the Dayton Accords) role in Bosnia, which still fell short of an all-out military intervention, created the expectation that Washington would try to mediate the ethnic conflict in Kosovo. And when that failed, the expectation was that the United States would use its military power to force a solution. Similarly, even a limited U.S. role in the UN operation in East Timor and in mediating a diplomatic solution to the conflict, especially if such efforts were perceived as critical to reaching a settlement, would send a signal to all the main actors that Washington is now a "team player" and that, as the most powerful player, it would and should get involved in the next showdown between Jakarta and a regional secessionist movement. With Indonesia and the UN disagreeing about the exact nature of the East Timor mission and the composition of the peacekeeping troops, one can expect the United States to try to mediate the disputes and pay off all sides in exchange for their willingness to make compromises. Yet even a marginally more activist U.S. policy would create incentives for the various interested parties—Australia, secessionist movements elsewhere in Indonesia, the Indonesian military—to exploit the U.S. presence in the region to their benefit and to internationalize

the simmering mini-civil wars that threaten to engulf Indonesia. If that happens, American forces could stumble into one of the crises that would inevitably be part of a gradual breakup of Indonesia. Those forces could find themselves playing the leading role in the "next Kosovo," perhaps not in East Timor but in one of the other provinces of Indonesia where secessionist struggles are already under way.

Pressure from Australia for U.S. Involvement

Especially worrisome is the pressure coming from Australia, Washington's oldest ally in East Asia. Numerous reports surfaced in the Australian press, including such leading newspapers as *Melbourne Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, that the United States was planning to send 15,000 Marines to East Timor after the August referendum. While Canberra and Washington denied those reports, they seemed to be based on extracts from top-secret cables sent to the Australian consul general in Hawaii, Peter Wolcott. The cables documented discussions between top U.S. and Australian military officers in Honolulu. Even if those discussions were "hypothetical," as some Australian officials have suggested, they indicate that the United States did—and perhaps still does—have contingency plans for a large-scale intervention in East Timor.²⁷

That Australia's core national interests (as opposed to general human rights considerations) are involved in the outcome of the crisis in East Timor is obvious. In addition to the fear that instability in Indonesia could bring a flood of refugees into Australia, the Australians are worried that a civil war in the Indonesian archipelago could spill over into Malaysia and Singapore, involve China, and thus threaten the balance of power in the region and force Canberra to assume a more assertive and costly diplomatic and military

role. The Australian political leadership, which has been trying in recent years to accentuate its Pacific orientation and to integrate Australia into the East Asian economic system, is aware that a possible confrontation with Jakarta over East Timor is bound to produce resentment of Australia in Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries. (Australia is still perceived by many Asians as an alien Anglo-Saxon entity.) Indeed, Australia, reflecting its sensitivity to Indonesian interests, was the only country to recognize the annexation of East Timor in 1975. Yet Canberra also played a leading role in managing the run-up to East Timor's ballot on independence. As *The Economist* pointed out, Australia's willingness to provide peacekeepers reflects its "particularly guilty conscience about the East Timorese: though they [the East Timorese] fought in the second world war to help prevent a Japanese invasion of Australia, the Australians—ever nervous of their big neighbor—shamefully broke western ranks to recognize Indonesia's rule of the annexed territory."²⁸ The Australian sense of guilt also has to do with the support Canberra (like Washington) has provided to Kopassus, Jakarta's Special Forces unit operating in East Timor.²⁹

It is not surprising that Australia prefers to see the United States, its military partner (along with New Zealand) in the ANZUS alliance, assuming some of the responsibility for dealing with the crisis in East Timor. Extensive American participation would not only help strengthen the diplomatic and military leverage of the UN operation vis-à-vis the Indonesians; it would also make it less likely that Australia would be seen as a regional bully trying to impose its will on an Asian nation. Instead, the country would be regarded as a part of a "U.S.-led mission." Hence, if the mission were to succeed in bringing peace to East Timor, Australia would be lauded for its initiative. Conversely, if things were to go wrong, the Americans would get most of the blame. That perception has some validity. Even the mild U.S. criticism of Indonesia's policy in East Timor

has already led several Indonesian politicians and journalists, including those who belong to the more reformist parties, to accuse Washington of devising a "sinister plot designed to split Indonesia." For example, the *Islamic Republika* newspaper suggested that the United States wanted to control a nominally independent East Timor in order to expand Washington's military supremacy in the Pacific. "The geographical position of East Timor—as a link between the Pacific and Indian oceans—is very strategic for American warships and business vessels," said the newspaper, adding that "surely the United States will not pass up this opportunity for its political and military interests to control the Asia-Pacific region."³⁰ That kind of U.S. bashing would become even more pronounced if the United States opted for a high-profile role in the East Timor peacekeeping mission.

Despite administration statements reflecting U.S. reluctance to take part in the operation on the ground, Australian officials and journalists have continued to call on Washington to participate in such an effort and expressed dismay at the lukewarm official American response. Prime Minister John Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer engaged for several days in a diplomatic scramble with the Americans, saying that Australia had a "strong expectation" of U.S. willingness to join a UN peacekeeping mission and that Canberra would like the United States to provide troops specializing in logistics, communications, and intelligence,³¹ as well as a "strategic reserve" of combat troops "who could come to the aid of the mission if it ran into trouble."³² Howard then expressed deep frustration at Washington's ambivalence about the nature of its role in East Timor peacekeeping, urging "full-blooded" American participation and calling on Washington to put "boots on the ground."³³

Australia's pressing Indonesia and the UN to move rapidly toward independence for East Timor is reminiscent in some ways of Germany's urging the West to support the independence of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia. In both cases there was pressure for a

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major change in the regional status quo on the part of a local player that did not take into consideration the dangerous repercussions and the political and military costs that such change might entail, including the potential for foreign intervention. It recalls the behavior of the little kid who initiates a fight with the bully in school (Belgrade and Jakarta) and then calls on his big brother (the United States) to come and save him from the consequences of his action. In all fairness to the Australians, the Clinton administration also jumped on the East Timor referendum bandwagon and expressed no reservations about the idea. But it should have been the responsibility of Australia, a neighbor of Indonesia with which it maintains close political, economic, and military ties, as well as that of Portugal, East Timor's former colonial ruler, to assess the probable consequences of an early referendum and to urge the UN to make the necessary arrangements with the Indonesians to avert the kind of violence that East Timor experienced. Australian newspapers reported that their country's intelligence services had warned the government that the militias in East Timor would “implement a scorched earth policy if the East Timor ballot returned a pro-independence result”—which raises serious questions about the failure to prepare for that eventuality and warn the United States.³⁴

If there is any lesson to be learned from the German and Australian behavior in regard to Yugoslavia and East Timor, respectively, it is this: the expectation that the “international community”—or, in reality, the United States—will pay the costs of their policies tends to encourage regional players to pursue irresponsible policies. Or, to put it differently, if Australia had been convinced that it would have to carry the burden of dealing with a disaster that could follow the East Timor referendum, Canberra might have pursued a different course. The options included being less supportive of the Indonesian plan; trying to reach some kind of deal with the Indonesian military; and coming up with effective contingency plans,

which could be supported by other interested regional players, for containing an outbreak of violence in East Timor. Some Australians, aware of the changing strategic environment, including Washington's reluctance to lead an international peacekeeping operation, have been calling on their government to adjust to the new strategic reality. “A Rude Awakening: We're on Our Own” was the title of an editorial in *Melbourne Age*.³⁵

With the United States refusing to “assume its customary center-stage role” and “putting the onus squarely on its ANZUS allies to tidy up their own back yard,”³⁶ the Australians now have an incentive to adopt a new approach and assume a more assertive role in the region. The core requirement of such an approach would be to try to form with other regional powers strategic coalitions that could help to contain future East Timors. It would not be cost free to transform Australia from a country relying on a Cold War alliance with the United States into an Asia-oriented player no longer dependent on U.S. military muscle for solving regional problems.³⁷ Indeed, the limited intervention in East Timor is already forcing Canberra to consider raising its defense spending, which at \$10 billion is only 1.8 percent of the country's gross domestic product. The East Timor episode has also exacerbated tensions between Australia and Indonesia and led to Jakarta's decision to end the 1995 security arrangement between the two countries.³⁸ Military assertiveness on the part of Australia could also produce a backlash in the region. The governments of Malaysia and other Asian countries are not enthusiastic about Australia's playing a leadership role in the region. That attitude makes it more difficult for Australian businesses to expand their presence in those countries and chills relations generally.³⁹ Finally, close military cooperation with authoritarian regimes in the region is bound to anger the human rights lobby in Australia.

But any effective regional power has to pay such costs. As one U.S. diplomat in Canberra put it, “I you wanna play, you gotta pay.”⁴⁰ If

Australia is serious about playing a constructive role to enhance stability and security in Southeast Asia, it must confront those difficult issues.

To create the proper incentive structure, Washington should phase out its role in the East Timor mission and firmly rebuff pressure from Australia—or any other source—for deeper involvement. Hence, while it should welcome the statement by Prime Minister Howard that his country was ready to play a broader military role and get “on with the job of being ourselves in the region,” it should reject his notion—enunciated in the so-called Howard Doctrine—that Australia should act merely as a sort of “deputy” to the American sheriff in the Pacific. The leader of the Labor opposition party, Kim Beazley, aptly described Howard’s formulation as “foolish and bizarre.”⁴¹

Congress as an Unreliable Restraint on Mission Creep

Will Congress use its power to limit U.S. involvement in the brewing Southeast Asian conflict? Given the failure of those lawmakers who had reservations about American troops becoming involved in the Balkans to block the military intervention in Kosovo, one should not count on Congress to slow a similar momentum toward deeper involvement in a Southeast Asian version of Kosovo. The Republican and Democratic leadership on Capitol Hill seemed to echo the administration’s confused reaction to the violence in East Timor, expressing support for “some American presence” as part of a UN effort to impose order there while opposing the idea of an all-out intervention. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) stated that the U.S. action in East Timor should be limited to transportation and logistics. Sen. Henry Reid (D-Nev.) warned that “we are arriving at peacekeeping fatigue in Nevada and I think around the rest of the country” and noted that East Timor was “not in our sphere of influence.” Nevertheless, when asked if the

United States should get involved, he said, “Very, very perhaps.”⁴² And a congressional resolution supporting the dispatch of the multinational force, including U.S. troops, was approved in September, with only a few lawmakers expressing mild criticism of the administration’s policy.⁴³

Several liberal lawmakers, with ties to human rights organizations and interest groups that have traditionally supported the East Timor cause, as well as those who represent districts with a large number of Portuguese-American voters (mainly in the New England states), have called for a more assertive U.S. reaction to the crisis. The traditional liberal support for the East Timorese secessionist movements goes back to the 1970s when U.S. administrations provided informal support for Indonesia’s suppression of the pro-independence movement in East Timor, on the grounds that it had ties to Moscow and Beijing.⁴⁴ “We have been ready to get involved in Europe and more reticent in Africa and Asia,” noted Sen. Russell D. Feingold (D-Wis.), pointing to the precedent of Kosovo. Since the justification for the intervention in Kosovo was not strategic but humanitarian, “how can there be a difference from Rwanda or East Timor?” he asked.⁴⁵ Feingold and Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) have been the leading voices on Capitol Hill supporting measures to punish Indonesia for its human rights violations. So far, neither Feingold nor Harkin has called for a high-profile U.S. role; they’ve merely urged a cutoff of economic and military assistance to Indonesia and advocated limited U.S. participation in the peacekeeping mission. Nevertheless, the presence of an active and noisy pro-East Timor lobby on Capitol Hill could help set the media agenda and tip the political balance in favor of a more activist U.S. approach to the crisis.

Resisting the Momentum for Intervention

Without consistent congressional and public resistance to U.S. interventionist poli-

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cies, the danger is that even the limited U.S. military presence in East Timor could lead to a wider engagement. Indeed, Congress and the media seemed to have paid almost no attention to the fact that the Clinton administration has already boosted American participation in the East Timor UN force to more than 450 troops from the original 200 U.S. military personnel authorized on September 17, 1999. At that time, Pentagon officials stated that the U.S. forces “would not undertake the kind of patrol duties that routinely would expose them to danger.”⁴⁶ But during a visit to Australia at the end of September, Secretary of Defense Cohen announced that the United States was increasing its commitment to the international peacekeeping force and that a Navy helicopter carrier with 900 Marines on board would provide support to the multinational force, helping to move equipment and supplies around the island. Pentagon officials offered assurances that the carrier, the *Belleau Woods*, was not being deployed with the intent of using its combat troops. Ominously, though, those same spokesmen conceded that the 900 Marines “could be called in an emergency.”⁴⁷

Notwithstanding the Clinton administration’s assertion that the United States was contributing only a few “logistics personnel” who would serve merely in “noncombat” and “support” roles, there is already a hint of an escalating U.S. commitment. There is significant U.S. involvement in handling such tasks as planning, intelligence, command and control, and the use of heavy-lift helicopters. Given the unstable political environment in East Timor (where a weak government that will operate under UN supervision may not have the resources to establish order) and in Indonesia itself (which is experiencing political, social, and economic turmoil), one can conceive of several scenarios leading to a large-scale, U.S.-led mission. Perhaps the most worrisome is the possibility of a military coup in Jakarta by nationalist and radical political forces that would try to change the status quo in East Timor by assisting

guerrilla raids into the UN protectorate from the western part of the island and launching a major offensive to suppress ethnic secessionist movements in other parts of Indonesia. With the global media focusing attention on the growing violence that would inevitably accompany such a development, the domestic and international pressure to increase U.S. military involvement would undoubtedly mushroom.

There is more than a little irony in the current U.S. involvement in the East Timor crisis. The Indonesian military that provided support to the murderous militias in East Timor—and that earlier was responsible for the destruction that claimed so many lives after the 1975 invasion—had been backed and trained by the United States for more than three decades. Despite the close ties between the U.S. military and Indonesian officers (17 of whom were trained in the United States in 1999), Washington could not prevent the bloodbath in East Timor.⁴⁸ In fact, U.S. intervention—in the form of assistance to the Indonesian military—ended up strengthening the very forces that were responsible for the most recent crisis, which in turn brought about pressure for a new U.S. intervention to repair the damage of the old. Congress is now finally considering a plan to cut off relations with “questionable” foreign militaries, but that action comes a little late to help the East Timorese.

That chain of events illustrates the potential for unintended consequences—the kind that can occur when Congress and the media refrain from focusing public attention on dangerous developments until a major crisis erupts. It is likely that East Timor will soon be placed on the policy and media back burner, even as U.S. involvement there continues to grow incrementally, until one of the local players triggers a new crisis that forces Washington to “do something” again.

Washington now has the opportunity to halt the momentum toward deeper intervention and to encourage additional changes in the strategic calculations stimulated by its refusal thus far to “do a Kosovo” in East Timor. Indeed,

the fact that the United States did not seek to lead the peacekeeping mission made it easier for China to support it and to play a constructive role in efforts to resolve the crisis. Moreover, the more assertive military role that Australia was forced to play in this crisis—as well as the contribution of personnel to the International Force for East Timor made by several members of the Association of South East Asian Nations, including Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—shows how local powers can work together to maintain or promote regional stability. In fact, Thailand and several other ASEAN members have participated in the Australian-led peacekeeping mission in East Timor and are playing a role in the new UN force that is replacing it. Thailand and the Philippines have called on the ASEAN group to play a more activist role in helping maintain regional security.⁴⁹ This suggests that a more disengaged U.S. posture is advisable. By resisting the urge to “do something”—and the pressure from its allies for an activist policy—Washington can contribute to “regionalizing” local crises instead of “internationalizing” (or more accurately, Americanizing) them. That would serve both American national interests and the quest for peace.

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By resisting the urge to “do something”—and the pressure from its allies for an activist policy—Washington can contribute to “regionalizing” local crises instead of “internationalizing” (or more accurately, Americanizing) them.

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