

Timor-Leste's complex geopolitics: the local, the regional and the global¹

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The recognition that Timor-Leste faces a complex geopolitical environment is nothing new (e.g. see Gusmao 2010). However, the most recent comprehensive assessment of Timor-Leste's strategic environment, *Forca 2020*, was in 2007. The fundamental reality for the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste is that of a small state in a big neighbourhood. *Forca 2020* variously describes Timor-Leste's region as being Southeast Asia, between Asia and the Pacific and between the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Government of Timor-Leste 2007). But it is really the broadest conception, that of the global competition between the world's sole superpower the US and the rising challenger China that most accurately describes the uncomfortable reality for Timorese policymakers. This dynamic shapes Timor-Leste's geopolitical environment in a way that makes it uniquely complex and challenging. More immediately it is located between two middle powers with a history of colluding against it – Australia and Indonesia; two regions with mutually exclusive regional fora – Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, and ultimately; two superpowers competing for dominance in the Asian theatre – the United States (US) and China. This paper seeks to examine these three levels of Timor-Leste's geopolitical environment – the local neighbourhood, the region and the global system – and the tensions that arise at the intersection between them. It will do this through a geopolitical lens, which offers:

a scholarly analysis of the geographical factors underlying international relations and guiding political interactions. Such analysis does not determine the directions that statecraft must take. It does, however, present the desirable directions and alert policy makers to the likely impact of their decisions on these relations and interactions (Cohen 2009, 11).

A sound understanding of contemporary geopolitical dynamics should be at the bedrock of any thinking about Timor-Leste's external relations.² No country can make foreign policy in a vacuum and for Timor-Leste to succeed it must develop policy in line with its geopolitical situation. This has been recognised by policymakers like former Secretary of State for Defence Pinto, who stated in his recent book, 'the geographical position of Timor-Leste has great potential benefit if we are able to predict its strategic importance in a global context.'³

The geopolitics of a small state

Small states are mainly recognizable by their constraints, the recognition that they cannot ensure their own security, let alone pose a threat to the security of others. This geopolitical fact is, and will always be, preeminent for Timor-Leste – it is a small state surrounded by bigger ones. In her study of small states, Hey (2003, 193) identifies that '[s]mall state foreign policy is heavily constrained by systemic factors,' that is factors at the international level, external to the state. This is largely due to the system-level dominance of larger powers and/or international organisations controlled by these larger and more resourceful states. She concludes that:

¹ The author wishes to thank Dr. Maryanne Kelton, Professor Michael Leach and Zac Rogers for comments on a draft of this paper.

² However, geopolitical analysis is not without its critics. For example, Calder argues '...geopolitical discourse can blind us to multiple long-run dangers, and to all-too-often neglected tools of conflict resolution, even as they lead to tragic misallocations of scarce financial resources.' See Kent E. Calder 2014, 'The Traps of Geopolitical Discourse and the Mandate for New Thinking', *Global Asia*, vol. 9, no. 3, Fall, pp. 58-63.

³ Author's translation from the original in Indonesian: 'Posisi geografis Timor Leste sangat potensial memberikan keuntungan jika kita mampu memprediksi kepentingan strategis dalam konteks global.' See Julio Tomas Pinto 2015, *Dari Invasi ke Rekonsiliasi: Dinamika Hubungan FALINTIL-Forca Da Defesa De Timor Leste dan Tentara Nasional Indonesia*, Kompas, Jakarta, p. 38.

international and regional dynamics are always at the top not only of small state's foreign policy agendas, but also the list of forces that explain those agendas and the behaviour directed at them (Hey 2003, 193).

This is not to say that other levels of analysis (national, individual) are not important factors in Timor-Leste's foreign policy decision-making, but simply that policymakers in Dili face greater constraints than choices. Small states have a limited ability to shape their external environment, and at worst, are at risk of being the playthings of more powerful nations. Minister of Defence Cristovão (2015) recently acknowledged this, stating that small countries are 'more often than not neglected or obliterated from the bigger picture when discussing the contemporary geo-strategic theatre.'

Timor-Leste's vulnerability is further exacerbated by its geostrategic value for larger powers; it is located in the strategic heart of the emerging Indo-Pacific theatre where the competition between the major powers is likely to play out – what Wesley (2011) has termed the Indo-Pacific Peninsula. The four core countries with a geostrategic interest in Timor-Leste – the US, China, Australia and Indonesia respectively – all value its geography. Timor-Leste's geography is described in *Forca 2020* as having an archipelagic structure, comprised of the primary territory on the eastern half of the island of Timor, the enclave of Oecussi, the island of Atauro and the islet of Jaco, with a total surface area of 18889km². The four compass directions around the country reveal the strategically vital Ombai-Wetar Strait to the north; the Arafura Sea and the Indonesian island of Leti to the east; the Timor Sea with its valuable oil and gas reserves and contested maritime border with Australia to the south, and; the Indonesian province of *Nusa Tenggara Timur*⁴ with its porous land border to the west (Government of Timor-Leste 2007, 6-7).

The eastern half of the island of Timor has long been of strategic interest to its neighbours and great powers alike, shaped by World War II, the Cold War and the emerging Sino-American rivalry. Located in the centre of the Indonesian archipelago, East Timor has always been a concern for Jakarta and its decision to annex the territory in 1975 was justified in order to prevent a "Cuba in Southeast Asia" (Smith 2005, 17). Since World War II Australia has intervened in East Timor three times, to preempt perceived Japanese invasion in 1942, under severe domestic pressure and in a volte-face of policy in 1999 and with concern about a potential 'arc of instability' of weak neighbours to her north in 2006.⁵ The sea lines of communication surrounding the island, particularly the Ombai-Wetar Strait, generate significant interest in the US and China. Ombai-Wetar is a deep-water strait that is used by US submarines, something that 'can not have been lost on Beijing...' (Storey 2011, 282). Therefore, Timor-Leste's primary challenge is to maintain its independence amongst such interest. Ian Storey (2011, 277) states that since independence Dili has had three core foreign policy goals: 1) preserve benign relations with both Indonesia & Australia; 2) join regional & international forums, foremost the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – ASEAN, and; 3) create a diverse range of bilateral relationships, focused on aid provision. Fundamentally, Timor-Leste's foreign policy objectives aim to secure its long-term security and prosperity, a goal that faces significant challenges at every geopolitical level.

The local neighbourhood: between Indonesia and Australia

At the first level of its geopolitics, Timor-Leste is situated between its two much larger neighbours – Indonesia and Australia. No country has a greater geopolitical relevance to Timor-Leste than Indonesia. The Indonesian archipelago surrounds Timor-Leste's western, northern and eastern flanks, and shares its only land border, totally encapsulating the enclave of Oecussi and the majority of its maritime border. Geographically dominated by its giant neighbour, Timor-Leste is dependent on Indonesia for, among other things: access to its Oecussi enclave, imports of primary foodstuffs and goods, diplomatic support and territorial integrity. Agreement on both land and maritime borders with Indonesia remain

⁴ East Nusa Tenggara (or literally the eastern southeastern islands) is the only majority-Catholic province of Indonesia, has a comparable level of development to Timor-Leste and is one of Indonesia's five "Melanesian" provinces.

⁵ For revised accounts of the 1942 and 1999 interventions see Clinton Fernandes 2010, 'Two tales of Timor' in Craig Stockings, *Zombie Myths of Australian Military History*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, pp. 213-233.

unresolved, although 13 years after Timor-Leste's independence, Jakarta appears keen to finally resolve these issues to, in President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's words, reassert Indonesia's "commitment as the main partner in the development of Timor Leste" (Parlina 2016). In the economic realm Timor-Leste is reliant on Indonesia for basic foodstuffs (Strating 2014, 242), in addition to being the source of nearly a third of its imports (DFAT 2015). Dependence also manifests itself in the diplomatic realm with Jakarta holding the key to Timor-Leste's long-held aspiration for ASEAN accession (Strating 2014, 242). As a result Dili has had to pursue a series of Jakarta-friendly actions. Certain policies are therefore effectively prohibited, such as supporting West Papuan independence and intensive defence co-operation with external powers. In this vein, pursuit of Indonesia over crimes committed during its occupation has had little result. The Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (known by its Portuguese acronym CAVR) to investigate human rights abuses, saw 'the Timorese government [all] short in following the CAVR's recommendations for further action' (Seabra 2012, 147). Dili has been accused of "appeasing" its neighbour (Strating 2013, 194) and has had to put up with things from its giant neighbour such as threats and the continuing prospect of working with compromised, former-military figures like Wiranto and Prabowo Subianto.⁶

Second in terms of importance, is Timor-Leste's only other neighbour – Australia. Although, not dependent upon Australia to the extent it is on Indonesia, Timor-Leste is similarly overshadowed by its larger neighbour to the south. Australia, like Indonesia, has demonstrated both an ability and willingness to intervene in Timor-Leste. Australia also shares a contested maritime border with Timor-Leste, which overlaps substantial hydrocarbon deposits in the Timor Sea. These are covered under the current CMATS treaty⁷ signed in 2006, which was set to manage exploitation of these resources. However, no development has yet commenced and Timor-Leste is currently pursuing arbitration over the treaty, questioning its validity after revelations of commercial espionage by Australia.⁸ This is crucial, as without arbitration, CMATS' provisions on revenue sharing and the maritime border make it effectively 'irrevocable' (Leach 2013). Australia is also the overwhelming aid provider to Timor-Leste, dwarfing Timor-Leste's other closest partners the US & the European Union (Brant 2015). Canberra's provision of aid, like its 2006 intervention was driven in large part by concern over a possible "arc of instability" to its north (see Ayson 2007, 215-231), which would be a source of transnational security concerns like asylum seekers and terrorism. In this sense the 2006 intervention follows Australia's pursuit of self-interest in the same way as the 1942 and 1999 interventions.

As a newly independent state, Timor-Leste's natural strategic reaction is to play its two neighbours off against one another as a means to 'maximize the strategic leverage that can be gained from each' (Leach & Percival-Wood 2014, 78). However, the utility of this strategy is significantly curtailed by the fact that neither of Timor-Leste's neighbours perceives the other as a strategic competitor. Despite differing political interests on a range of issues from asylum seeker movements to US military bases. Jakarta and Canberra share fundamental strategic interests; both are concerned about the potential security implications of China's growing regional influence. So much so that Australia has supported Dili's accession to ASEAN 'as a means for limiting China's potential influence in Timor-Leste' (Leach & Percival-Wood 2014, 80), which can also be said for Indonesia. The two countries also do not pose a security threat to each other, as White has observed:

the Australian army could get to Indonesia but do nothing once it got there; the Indonesian army could overrun Australia but can't get here. So we just accept each other and get along (Wesley 2010).

Indonesia and Australia's bilateral relations far outweigh their relations with Timor-Leste, and both are therefore likely to neglect Timor-Leste when there are not perceived concerns to their security, respectively. Faced with a history of collusion and neglect, it is unlikely that Timor-Leste will be able to accommodate its fundamental foreign policy interests solely between Indonesia and Australia, and

⁶ Both of these individuals ran in Indonesia's legislative election last year with their own personalised election vehicles. Prabowo's successes lead him to run for president, which he only narrowly lost, while Wiranto campaigned for the eventual winner Jokowi and ultimately joined the current governing coalition.

⁷ Full name: Treaty between Australia and Timor-Leste on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea.

⁸ For full and up-to-date details of the dispute, see <http://www.laohamutuk.org/Oil/Boundary/CMATSindex.htm>

therefore understandable that Timor-Leste looks beyond to the level of regional institutions as a potential hedge against this dependence.

The regional level: Southeast Asia or the Pacific?

As a small state unable to secure its interests against its larger neighbours, Timor-Leste has looked to the regional level to address its geopolitical insecurities. Joining Southeast Asia's primary regional institution – ASEAN has been a foreign policy goal for Timor-Leste since at least 2001 and was considered by FRETILIN as early as 1975 (Ortuoste 2011, 8). However, as of 2015, despite successfully joining the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 2005, Timor-Leste has been unsuccessful in its attempts to join ASEAN. Opposition has come at various times from Laos, Myanmar and Singapore for reasons varying from Timor-Leste's low-level diplomatic infrastructure to differing political values, while Indonesia has remained a consistent supporter (Smith 2005, 19). ASEAN has two primary benefits for Timor-Leste: first, it applies ASEAN's long-held "non-interference" norm to Timor-Leste, therefore theoretically guaranteeing its territorial sovereignty, and; secondly, it links Timor-Leste into one of the world's most dynamic economic regions. However, the ASEAN of today faces some severe issues. First, there are concerns over its future functionality, in 2012 under the chairmanship of Cambodia the organisation failed to release a joint *communiqué* for the first time in its history, with members divided over the territorial disputes of some members with China in the South China Sea (Emmerson 2012). Second, there are also questions over core state – Indonesia's – commitment to ASEAN under new president Jokowi, with a key advisor stating in 2014 stating that the organisation is no longer the prized cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy (Sukma 2014). Additionally, the region's non-interference norm comes at a price; the conservative countries of Southeast Asia are largely anathema to criticism of the human rights record of Myanmar's military regime. This has already seen Timor-Leste backing down over its criticism and softening its support for Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese Opposition (Ortuoste 2011, 16-7).

The Pacific, unlike Southeast Asia, has no one primary regional institution, it is divided between the: Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), Secretariat of the Pacific Community and Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). The region's fractious regionalism raises serious questions over its utility to Timor-Leste's foreign policy interests. The similarly-sized small island states of the Pacific do hold shared concerns with Timor-Leste over important issues such as addressing climate change and the humanitarian situation in West Papua. However, the region's weakness has allowed it to be exploited by external powers. As Sahin (2014, 11) notes, key organisations like the PIF are 'dominated by Australia and New Zealand.' Indonesia has dramatically increased its presence in the MSG, being granted associate membership in 2015 to represent its five "Melanesian" provinces and successfully preventing regional recognition of an independent West Papua (Blades 2015). While the PIDF, created by Fiji under the leadership of Voreqe Banimarama as an alternative, free from Australian dominance, is financially supported by China as part of its regional engagement strategy (see Ratuva 2014, 409–422).

Ideally, Timor-Leste would prefer membership to both regional institutions (Ramos-Horta 2001 quoted in Sahin 2014, 10); however, they are exclusive of one another. Timor-Leste faces a choice between Southeast Asia with its dynamic economies but conservative politics and the Pacific with its similar sized states but fractious regionalism. But even this difficult choice is diminished by the relative weaknesses of both regional projects, which struggle to manage their respective neighbourhoods and mitigate great power rivalries. Dili may then want to avoid the binary Southeast Asia/Pacific option and opt instead for identifying itself as an Indo-Pacific country and aspire to join the East Asia Summit. But, Timor-Leste is already a member of the broad ARF and this has had limited strategic benefits. Also, it is unlikely that the broader EAS with an ever-greater number of members can achieve what ASEAN has yet to do in developing a cohesive community able to manage the region. There is little to be offered Timor-Leste at the regional level.

The global theatre: Sino-American competition

At the highest level of current geopolitics is the global competition between the world's two most powerful countries – China and the US. Beijing has rapidly built relations with Timor-Leste since its

independence in 2002. China became the first government to establish diplomatic relations with Timor-Leste and was the destination of Gusmao's first visit post-referendum. In its efforts to woo Dili, China has employed a range of strategies. It has cleverly engaged Timor-Leste through the Community of Portuguese Language Countries with strategic usage of its formerly-Portuguese Macao territory (Leach 2007-2008, 6-8). China has been an important source of aid, providing USD \$52.16 million to Timor-Leste between 2006 and 2013, coming all in the form of "no strings attached" grants (Brant 2015).⁹ Much of this aid has also been of maximum visibility with China constructing: the Presidential Palace, the Foreign Affairs building, the Defence Force HQ and an army barracks in Dili. China has also begun to increase its involvement in supporting Timor-Leste's defence capabilities, with the sale of two 50-year old Shanghai Class patrol boats that were ultimately found to be 'unseaworthy in East Timor's open rougher waters' (Kingsbury 2012b, 7). China has already begun to show its hand in Timor-Leste, recognising the geostrategic value of the Ombai-Wetar Strait, Beijing requested in 2008 to build a radar array along Timor-Leste's north coast (Kingsbury 2012b, 8). Additionally, China's interests in Timorese oil and gas extended to requesting 'exclusive rights' to the deposits; both Chinese proposals were rejected by Dili (Kingsbury 2009, 195). Dili has however been more receptive to China's regional economic plans.¹⁰ Ultimately, Horta (2007, 1) has stated that China's interest in Timor-Leste 'is part of its overall expansion into Southeast Asia and its strategy to balance the US' influence in the region.'

The other pole in the global geopolitical competition is the US. Compared to the other countries previously considered, the US has relatively less immediate geopolitical interest in Timor-Leste and has traditionally considered it and other small Pacific island states the responsibility of its ally Australia. On the 1999 intervention, National Security Advisor Berger said 'We don't have a dog running in the East Timor race, but we have a very big dog running down there called Australia and we have to support it' (Berger 1999 quoted in Fernandes 2004, 97). This accords with the long-held view in Washington that 'Australia and New Zealand still carry, and should carry, the larger percentage of the responsibility in the region' (Holbrooke 1978 quoted in Halvorson 2013, 440). However, Washington has become concerned more recently about China's growing presence in Timor-Leste. In particular it is concerned with Chinese designs on Ombai-Wetar and as a result has enhanced defence cooperation with its ally Australia, announcing in 2011 a rotation of marines in the northern Australian port-city of Darwin (Kingsbury 2012a).

Timor-Leste's natural desire to offset its dependence on its neighbours Indonesia and Australia by building a partnership with China is severely complicated by the geopolitical competition between the US and China. Any moves by Dili that could be perceived as enhancing Chinese influence in the region will face relatively unified opposition from the US as well as its ally Australia and partner Indonesia. As a result Timor-Leste is stuck between two neighbours not supportive of its interests; two regions unable to manage their respective affairs, and; a global power struggle that constrains choices in the first two levels. This is not an envious position, but one that Timorese policymakers must address to ensure the success of Asia's newest state.

Responding to geopolitical complexity

Timor-Leste's geopolitical situation is obviously marked by a degree of complexity, but it is the intersection of the three levels of analysis identified in this paper that bring it to a near incomparable level.¹¹ Dili has naturally sought to offset the dominance of its neighbours Indonesia and Australia by pursuing regionalism and enhancing its relationship with China. However, there are severe limitations to both of these strategies, emanating from the global geopolitical overlay of Sino-American

⁹ Compared to USD \$707.92 million from Australia over the same period.

¹⁰ During Prime Minister Gusmao's April 2014 visit to China, Dili and Beijing signed a comprehensive partnership agreement that indicated support for a number of initiatives: '15. The Timor-Leste Government appreciated and supported the proposals made by the Chinese Government to build a 21st-century Maritime Silk Road and an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and would actively participate in these processes.' See 'Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on Establishing Comprehensive Partnership of Good-neighbourly Friendship, Mutual Trust and Mutual Benefit', *Government of Timor-Leste*, <<http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=9967&lang=en>>.

¹¹ The author has struggled to find adequate historical analogies for Timor-Leste's geopolitical situation: maybe pre-World War One Serbia, Cold War Jordan and/or modern Papua New Guinea.

competition. Both Southeast Asia and the Pacific have become theatres for the great games of external powers and any cooperation with China raises suspicions in the majority of regional states that continue to harbour fears about Chinese intentions. How Dili decides to manage this complexity will be crucial for the future of the new state, which requires a safe, secure and fair environment in which to develop. New Prime Minister Rui Araujo has declared that Timor-Leste will pursue a diversification strategy, he said:

[w]e opt for non-aligned political commitment. We are a friend of everyone...And of course, we will be selective in terms pressures we face. But the most important thing in terms of the relationship is mutual benefit and mutual respect (Channel NewsAsia 2015).

This policy is almost identical to that pursued by former Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014). SBY followed a diversification policy of 'a million friends, zero enemies' while in office. This however was seen by many in Jakarta as failing to adequately support Indonesia's interests and SBY's successor Jokowi stated upon assuming the presidency that:

Our [foreign] policy is free and active, befriend all countries but [we will put first] those who give the most benefits to the people...What's the point of having many friends but we only get the disadvantages? many friends should bring many benefits (Wardhy 2014).

Under Jokowi, Indonesia has returned to a more classic strategy of playing competing powers off against each other, an option for a middle power like Indonesia (Brummitt 2015). A small power with Timor-Leste's geopolitical constraints however lacks the same capabilities and does not have such luxury. Seabra (2012, 160) sees Dili as pursuing a soft strategy of leveraging relations with China against Jakarta and Canberra into the future, without 'explicitly using [that] influence...as doing so would signal the final passing to the other side of the diplomatic barricade.' However, such a strategy is akin to walking a tightrope and contingent on considerable diplomatic skill. Ultimately there is no one ideal strategic choice for Timor-Leste to pursue, but having a clear understanding of how global geopolitics constrains foreign policy options will at least inform policymakers to the likely impact of their decisions and guide them toward more prudent decision making.

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