

# Australia and East Timor:

## If you can't get a strategy get a plan young man

Grant Sanderson

Australia has a perpetual problem in and with East Timor. There seems to be no other conclusion given last year's emergency deployment of substantial Australian troops to quell violence and instability. For the second time in seven years Australia led an International response aimed at restoring law and order and saving East Timorese from other East Timorese intent on doing them harm.

Such events have caused many to question again the long-term viability of the East Timorese state. Others are debating what actions the East Timorese must take to save themselves. While I could write several tomes on what I believe needs to be done to address issues of security, education, health, legal reform, agricultural and industrial capacity, even how to better manage the traffic in Dili, this article is not about advising the East Timorese on how they could do things better. I have spent most of the last four years doing just that and have obviously been very successful – so successful that I had people I had advised in tactical command on both sides of the recent conflict. No, the purpose of this article is to talk about the central issue of what Australia should do to protect itself from the serious implications that continued instability in East Timor brings.

There is no question that an unstable East Timor is a major strategic liability for Australia. This is not just because we have had to spend over \$A2.4 billion in maintaining an ADF presence there for most of the last seven years. An unstable East Timor lacking in effective Government brings the threat of border and resources insecurity, the threat of population movement as people flee poverty and violence, the chance for serious international criminal and terrorist elements to establish themselves in the vacuum, and the real chance of generating friction between Australia and Indonesia.

The leaders of Indonesia are too polite to laugh at us in public but they must be tempted to say 'we told you so'. Even though to date they have been largely supportive of our efforts, further and regular outbreaks of instability will test their patience, especially if it spills over the border into West

Timor. Make no mistake, Indonesians now see East Timor as largely Australia's responsibility. As much as Australia has tried to internationalise the problem and avoid taking leadership roles (except of course when the wheels fall off) we are not fooling our Indonesian neighbour. There are many Australians who would wish that this reality was not true just as there many who want to talk about Australian policy toward East Timor as if the events of the last seven years had never occurred. But denial is not a strategy and the only practicable way forward is work how best we can help put East Timor on the right path before enduring major strategic problems become entrenched.

### Planning the way forward

So what steps should Australia take to protect itself? There is no shortage of ideas on what can be done but in my opinion there is only one thing that will make an immediate difference and must be done if any group of ideas is to be realised – Australia has to develop a plan.

Australian decision-makers should have a plan for how they intend to bring stability to East Timor and what to do when difficulties arise, as they surely will. I am not talking about a plan simply to respond to a crisis, to react once instability occurs, but a real plan. A plan that has real long-term goals and objectives with measurable outcomes so progress can be gauged and adjustments made. There may be some readers who think this is a redundant observation. But my view is shaped by my experiences as Commanding Officer of the Defence Co-operation Program in East Timor – when I received no written direction from anyone for a year, and also because I firmly believe a good plan could have made a major difference in reshaping events and curbing the recent troubles. Not a specific plan of mine but any plan would have made a difference. I am committed to the principle of Australia needing a plan and we can sort out the specifics of it later.

Why am I so set on a plan for the sake of having a plan? Well, certainly not because I am simply a military cripple (I now happen to be an ex-military cripple but because a plan, especially a whole-of-government plan, requires extensive research, analysis, debate and then agreement. Not that these elements are good in themselves but at least it forces decision-makers and planners to consider consequences over time and to weigh the impact of doing something as well as doing nothing. This is important because busy people prioritise. Generally the most pressing issues are dealt with first, then the less pressing – often leaving the non-pressing until later, often much later, often until they become very pressing.

As observed in the recent Ministerial-initiated review of the Australian Defence Organisation, the current strategic environment means anything not dealing with immediate operations, or requiring instant analysis and decision, often gets pushed into the next meeting. The Proust Review report implies that the senior leadership of the Department of Defence is disconnected from day-to-day management of the organisation. If the responsible agency for an issue is then under-staffed, has mainly young and inexperienced staff or is overseen by largely unqualified and indecisive supervisors, the inevitable consequence is confusion, inaction and paralysis. Planning and plans overcome this problem by aligning decision-makers, supervisors and desk officers through the planning process before any crisis or other major events occur, thus helping to reduce uncertainty and indecisiveness. But best of all plans give the actors at the coalface confidence that activities in support of the plan will receive support and resources. Such activities would not need to be constantly justified to Canberra because supervisors are ignorant of the conditions on the ground or the considerations in play.

What sort of factors would a good plan for East Timor consider? At the very least it would need to assess the following factors:

- the history of East Timor pre-1999;
- the history and complexity of East Timorese politics;
- the Institutions of East Timor;
- realistic timeframes for bringing stability; and
- the command and control mechanisms required to achieve the desired objectives.

## East Timor pre-1999

Good planning would require decision-makers to consider in detail the history of the struggle for Independence, how the East Timorese resistance movement had many internal problems, and how there was much spilling of blood before the movement became unified. They would consider how Xanana was forced to split Fretilin in 1983 in order to create a centrist, holistic national resistance movement, and that there is still great bitterness about this, even though it was critical to eventual success. They would also learn how East

Timorese can view Australia in a pre-1999 and post-1999 way and how this complicates the relationship.

As my supposed pro-Australian good friend, Major Alfredo Reinado, said to me in 2003 after a Memorial Service for the victims of the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre:

*You know we are very grateful for what Australia has done for us (East Timor) but you must remember not long after **this** happened Gareth Evans was drinking champagne with the Indonesians over the Timor Sea saying that only a small number of people had been killed. We like you, but for us these memories are real and you pretending that history began in 1999 is wrong and makes us angry.*

From these considerations decision-makers may ponder whether sometimes letting East Timorese politics run their course rather than truncating the conflict too early may not bring greater long-term stability, just as it did in 1983. They would also recognise the pitfall in believing Australia occupies a special position and would therefore be wary about overplaying their hand. They would then be in a position to plan always remembering that Timorese are forgiving but they never forget.

## East Timorese politics

The plan would also consider the Byzantine nature of relationships across families, political groups, commercial arrangements and racial groups. It would note that four of the eight candidates in the recent presidential elections had close ties by blood or marriage but they often find it hard to have a civil meal together.

It would note that the breaking and reforming of alliances is an accepted part of East Timorese politics and that making use of people is not the same as being friends with them. It might note, as Brigadier Taur Matan Ruak (the East Timorese CDF) once said to me: *You never really know an East Timorese until you have been betrayed by him.*

Planners would observe the East Timorese tendency to fall back on blood, family and region when under stress. From these observations decision-makers may consider the pitfalls of becoming involved, or seen to be involved, in East Timorese politics – and they may note the inevitable natural weakness of centralised government in this environment. They may even understand how the international development focus centred on Dili has caused an explosion in population size and ethnic mix in the city and thus increased the tensions and violence. Planners may ponder how the Indonesians managed this through decentralised decision-making and financial distributions in order to keep regional populations more homogeneous. They may remember from Uncle Remus that the only way to avoid the embrace of the Tar-Baby is to not throw a punch and stay at arms length.

## East Timorese institutions

When considering institutional structures, planners would identify that all standard Government institutions in East Timor are very weak and lacking in resources and trained

people. They may also note that the strongest institutions in the country and the only major ones that pre-date 2000 are the Roman Catholic Church, Fretilin and FALANTIL. I am sure they would consider how these institutions and the myriad of local youth groups were forged during the independence struggle and recognise that these institutions were the only ones not to collapse in May 2006. In fact these groups became the places many people turned to for support when under threat.

From these observations planners may consider the necessity to redouble international efforts to assist the East Timorese Government to build strong national institutions. They would also analyse how they can engage with and bring the strong extant institutions into the process. Such analysis would probably lead planners to reconsider Australian ambivalence to Fretilin and FALANTIL and consider how Australia could work harder to help the rank and file of these organisations achieve their personal goals so that the strong reasons for these institutions to exist could be mollified. They may also consider how the institutional robustness of these groups works effectively in East Timor when more Western structural models seem to fail and then try to translate these qualities into new institutions.

## Realistic timeframes for bringing stability

Effective plans consider the feasibility of progress and set realistic timelines linked to objective outcomes. This allows the executors of the plan to have direction, security, resources and certainty over time.

In considering this, planners may review the state of East Timor in 1999 and where it is today. They may recall assessments in 1999 which stated that, much like Afghanistan today, it would take at least a generation to see major change in East Timor and that progress could only be achieved through wide-ranging efforts targeting most societal elements. They may then shake their heads at why we limited the majority of our national expenditure and most of our military effort to securing a border for three years longer than necessary rather than focusing on capacity building over the rest of the country.

Much like I shook my head when International Policy Division staffers from Canberra visited Dili in 2005, only six months before the East Timorese Defence Force spectacularly split, and asked when could we wind back our assistance program and reap a peace dividend. However, after considering these factors the planners would then undoubtedly renew their commitment to putting the appropriate resources in place with a realistic timeline for their achievement.

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## Command and control

Another major benefit of planning is that decision-makers would have to consider who would be responsible for each element of the plan and how various elements were to be co-ordinated. They would definitely mandate the establishment of a standing body from various interested departments in Australia that would co-ordinate a whole-of-government approach to East Timor. This would most likely demand gruelling treks across Canberra, from Russell to Barton, at least monthly.

The planners would also probably surmise that having disparate groups inside the Department of Defence nominally responsible for less disparate elements in East Timor is probably not the best way to do business. In fact, such convoluted lines of command and control (and I use the word command loosely here) may lead to embarrassing events during operations where controlling headquarters work at cross purposes. For example, the withdrawal of qualified military linguists from Theatre at the same time the strategic commander is briefing senior Defence committees on shortages of available linguists, or the issuing of written orders forbidding one group of the ADF to provide critical support to another, five days after that support in the form of engineering advice and political liaison functions had already been given. They may also consider the confusion such alignment irregularities can cause amongst the East Timorese who naturally do not distinguish between ADF personnel on the basis of which floor or section in Building R1 their orders come from. It is worth noting that the not insignificant and in some case heroic activities conducted by unarmed members of the DCP in support of the joint task force (JTF) were rewarded by commendations from the operational side, after it became clear that the policy side of Defence were less than interested in the effort, even though much of the support activity occurred prior to the JTF deployment.

A detailed plan would also recognise that an effective strategy would consider the whole stability mission as a continuous operation up until the strategic endstate had been achieved. It would probably recognise that, over a generation, there would likely be ups and downs in the security situation – and that these would best be handled seamlessly rather than by chopping ownership backwards and forwards between headquarters.

Planners would also understand that to be effective, the controlling headquarters would require the full range of staff functions including planners, watch-keepers, logisticians and personnel managers. In other words it needs to be a headquarters. Maybe they would question why instead a bureaucratically-organised policy staff such as International Policy Division, which has none of the control functions and almost no staff formally trained in anything other than writing briefs, is responsible for the Defence components of such long-term operations right up until after a crisis is in full swing. I know I did.

## Testing the plan

Of course there are many other factors competent planning teams would consider. In fact, given the nature of the task and the need for iteration, planning would probably be a constant activity. But that of course is the beauty of a properly conducted planning process – it allows all factors to be considered, directions to be updated, and provides the doers with the freedom of action to do what is necessary to achieve the mission with minimal constraints.

Given the professionalism of our senior planners they would also undoubtedly want personnel experienced in East Timor from one or more recent deployments in country – and not just inside UN compounds – to come in regularly and help test planning assumptions and review the plan against reality. This should particularly apply to such personnel who knew many of the key players among the East Timorese.

They would do this because they would want to make sure that they were not allowing the insular nature of the Canberra bureaucratic environment to lead to closed decision loops. When this happens the strategy can become disconnected from reality creating dissonance between the tactical and strategic levels, potentially leading to inchoate objectives on one extreme or mission creep on the other.

Mission creep is where the initial objectives of the mission become overwhelmed by a growing number of seemingly important tasks, but tasks which in reality are unrelated to the core strategic objective. A famous recent example of mission creep was the deployment of a US Special Forces task group to Somalia in 1993 outside the in-country chain of command for the remainder of the US and UN force. The aim was to kill or capture a local warlord supposedly because this would improve the security situation. As history shows the operation did not work out very well and ended in ignominious strategic failure for US forces after the Somalis turned on them. As the Americans found, killing the locals in offensive operations is not the best way to be seen as an honest broker and should be avoided.

A senior Australian Army officer told me and a colleague in September 2005 that East Timor was not that important to Australia and that in his opinion we would never again deploy large numbers of Australian soldiers back there. To the contrary, I firmly believe East Timor is of critical importance to the security of Australia and that the events of the last 12 months validate this position. If I did not hold this view I would not have sought an accompanied two-year posting there. I would not still be passionate about the outcome despite my obvious frustrations and despite having watched a number of East Timorese friends die in the recent troubles.

I fervently believe that the best way to secure Australia's interests in such an unpredictable and complex environment is to apply all elements of our national power to stabilising the young nation – but only after a thorough consideration of the facts and careful consideration and definition of our national

objectives. I also believe that the quality or direction of the plan is fundamentally less important than actually having one and having gone through the process of developing one. Because without this intellectual effort, and without Australia having a broadly agreed strategy to focus our efforts, we will remain at the mercy of events on the ground and locked into a reactive rather than a suitably proactive posture.

One can only hope that a planning process along these lines is ongoing in the halls of Russell and Barton. If so, Australia would then know exactly what to do if, for example Fretilin had re-emerged as the dominant political force following the current election cycle. Just as I hope we will know what to do if serious violence erupts after the smoke clears following the important East Timorese parliamentary elections this year. I hope this is the case because the desperation of either side will become acute if they believe they are in danger of losing access to power and the associated oil monies.

We should also have a contingency if both sides decide it is in their interests to form an alliance and join, however temporarily, in a 'unity Government' ostensibly focused on restoring national sovereignty and reasserting East Timorese authority against those 'colonialist' elements that have allegedly usurped their independence. I acknowledge that compiling a strategic plan is not an easy task nor do I wish to be flippant about the amount of work required. But I do not agree with the International Policy Division desk officer

who said to me one day in 2005 when I asked for a decision on a long-term investment:

*Look the future is really unpredictable we are not sure what's going to happen so you will have to wait.*

This type of on-the-run and purely reactive policy-making for the handling of one of Australia's continuing strategic problems in the immediate region is no way for a middle-level power to behave. Moreover, even a policy is not enough because the policy will too often be too vague. Any policy must in turn be capable of execution by a detailed plan that covers possible eventualities beyond current events as they are now foreseen – or not foreseen as it appears in the case of East Timor.

The plan must in turn be executed by an agency capable of monitoring and measuring progress, and swiftly reaching effective decisions on implementation or adjustments when they are required. In the case of East Timor in particular, this means the responsibility for commanding and controlling the planning and execution must be held by an ADF headquarters which can do so, rather than a bureaucratically-organised, acculturated and focused 'policy' division within the Canberra bureaucracy which clearly cannot. ♦

*Grant Sanderson served in the Army from January 1983 until March 2007, including regimental service with the RAR and SASR. He served in East Timor three times in 2000, 2003 and from January 2005 until January 2007.*



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