

# The morally bankrupt foreign policy that entrenches Australia's reputation as a regional bully

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As a sovereign nation Timor-Leste is entitled to have permanent maritime boundaries and the hypocritical Australian government is the only barrier

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**T**his week over 10,000 people descended on Australia's embassy in Dili, Timor-Leste, to demand that the Australian government enter negotiations to finally establish permanent and fair maritime boundaries in the Timor Sea.

The growing resentment of Australia in the region can no longer be ignored. As if pilfering gas and oil revenue from a tiny developing nation wasn't enough, we're now seen as hypocrites.

In his first major foreign policy speech as Prime Minister in Washington in January, Malcolm Turnbull, with an eye on China's territorial aggression in the South China Sea, urged other countries to abide by international law. Delving into the specifics, he called on his hosts, the Americans, to ratify the UN Convention on the Law of Sea. He was left with egg on his face. Neither the PM or his advisors had done their homework - for this is the very UN convention that the Australian Government refuses to acknowledge in its dispute with Timor-Leste.

Just two months before Timor-Leste's independence in 2002, the Howard government pre-emptively withdrew Australia's recognition of the maritime boundary jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice. It then stubbornly refused to establish permanent maritime boundaries with the fledgling nation.

Instead it jostled Timor-Leste into a series of temporary resource sharing arrangements - all of which short change Timor-Leste out of billions of dollars in oil and gas revenue.

Further, we now know of its underhanded tactics to do so. The Australian government is accused of using an aid project as a guise to bug the Timorese cabinet room so it could spy on Timor-Leste's leaders and officials during negotiations.

These are not things to be proud of. And neither side of politics has had clean hands in the matter.

To its credit however, the ALP now appears ready to atone for its sins.

The guilt of having masterminded the original "Timor Gap" treaty, which saw Australia under Bob Hawke and the Indonesian Suharto dictatorship begin the divvying up of Timor-Leste's oil, has hung like a cloud over Labor foreign policy for decades. But in a recent address to the Press Club, Labor's shadow foreign minister, Tanya Plibersek, committed a future Labor government to fresh negotiations to establish permanent maritime boundaries and put the dispute to bed once and for all.

Importantly, Plibersek also promised that if the two nations cannot reach consensus about exactly where to establish the boundaries, a Labor government would be willing to submit to arbitration -

that is, it would let the independent umpire decide.

This marks the end of bipartisan support for a morally bankrupt foreign policy which has done nothing but entrench Australia's reputation as a regional bully.

In solidarity with the protests in Dili, smaller actions this week are being held in Jakarta, Manila, Kuala Lumpur, Sydney, Canberra, Adelaide and Melbourne. The heat is turning up on the Australian government, it can't continue to try to sweep this issue under the carpet.

As a sovereign nation Timor-Leste is entitled to have permanent maritime boundaries. Australia is the only barrier to achieving this. Timor-Leste's negotiations with Indonesia regarding its land borders have nearly been completed without even the slightest sign of a hiccup and similar negotiations for maritime boundaries are now underway.

It's time for the Australian government to sit down at the negotiating table.

The overwhelming consensus is that current international law would see maritime boundaries based along the median line - halfway between the two coastlines. Meaning that if an oil or gas field was located closer to Timor-Leste then it would belong to Timor-Leste and if it was closer to Australia then it would be ours. Common sense and fair.

It also happens to be what we agreed to with New Zealand in 2006 when we resolved overlapping claims off Norfolk and Macquarie Islands.

The Timor Sea Justice Campaign is gathering momentum, because people are increasingly realising that this issue is not about charity, but one about justice. Timor-Leste is simply asking for what they it is legally entitled to - no more and no less.

The Australian public needs to stand with the Timorese once again and demand better of our own Government.