

# China work camps reveal influence at heart of Timor

Greg Brown The Australian September 2, 2019



A Chinese worker at one of the Covec camps. Picture: AAP

In East Timor, Chinese labourers are living quietly in makeshift accommodation, among unkempt gardens and dirty swimming pools.

The workers are deployed on major infrastructure projects in the tiny nation, illustrating Beijing's growing presence — and influence — in one of Australia's nearest neighbours.

The five Chinese camps, maintained by Communist Party of China-controlled contractor Covec, at one point housed about 500 workers who were flown in to help build East Timor's first expressway.

The camps, which also housed Timorese locals employed on the project, reveal the extent of China's ambition to assist East Timor in building critical infrastructure on the nation's south coast.

Security experts are warning that Beijing could use its influence to gain a military foothold on Australia's doorstep.

The road, which will span 156km when complete, is part of the Tasi Mane vision of former president Xanana Gusmao, which would provide infrastructure to pipe an estimated \$US50 billion (\$74bn) of oil and gas from the Greater Sunrise fields in the Timor Sea.

Former Victorian premier Steve Bracks, an adviser to Mr Gusmao, said the camps showed China had a long-term investment and strategic interest in East Timor. Mr Bracks last week warned that China believed it could win over East Timor as a strategic ally on Australia's doorstep.

Speaking to *The Australian* yesterday, Mr Bracks said the Morrison government must facilitate a funding partner for the Sunrise project, or it would likely be China.

"The only way Australia can resist this pull to China is to facilitate the in-country (East Timor-based) development of the Sunrise field and open up a dedicated Austrade office in Timor-Leste," Mr Bracks said.

The project is part of East Timor's plans to develop the gas in-country rather than in Darwin, and the Chinese-built highway will link to an LNG plant, oil refinery and airport, in a move the fledgling democracy hopes will secure its economic future.



An aerial view of one of the workers camps. Picture: AAP

In the two camps visited by *The Australian*, near the south coast town of Suai, at least 20 Chinese residents were living there as they maintained the completed stage of the highway, which runs 33km and is virtually unused, despite being completed in 2017.

A truck station with millions of dollars worth of Chinese construction vehicles is located near the camps waiting to be deployed. Among the dozens of Sany and Volvo-branded vehicles were dump trucks, diggers, graders and bulldozers.

Wang Qiang, a Chinese engineer who lives in one of the camps, said a larger influx of workers from China was expected if Covec won the tender for the second stage of the \$500 million Suai-Beaco highway project. Mr Qiang said 1500 workers were involved in the construction of the first stage, including 500 from China.

“Maybe next week or after a few weeks, some guys will come,” Mr Qiang said. “There are four stages. This is the first. The second, third and fourth haven’t begun. We are waiting for government department to send funds.

“Including local workers, and Chinese staff, and some guys come from another country, about 1500 were working on this. We have another four camps.”

Mr Qiang denied Chinese prisoners were being sent to East Timor to work on local construction projects, as claimed by business leaders. However, *The Australian* understands ex-convicts have been deployed to work at other Indo-Pacific projects.

Mr Qiang said he had taken part in Chinese overseas projects in Oman, Mongolia and Tanzania.

“It’s a global company. In China, we have lots of these companies. Highways, bridges, anything. High-speed railway,” he said. The camps include poor-quality demountable bedrooms and offices, unkempt gardens and dirty swimming pools.

They also feature Chinese and East Timor flags, side-by-side on flagpoles, and showcase pictures of previous major Chinese construction feats, including the Great Wall of China.

China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation has recently been awarded a contract to build a \$US943 million port as part of the Tasi Mane development.



Chinese engineer Wang Qiang, who works for Covec-CRFG in East Timor. Picture: AAP

The visit to the camp came after Mr Gusmao, who is still enormously influential in East Timorese politics, demanded an impromptu meeting with Scott Morrison during his visit to Dili on Friday to commemorate the 20-year anniversary of its independence from Indonesia. The Prime Minister's office confirmed the main focus of the meeting was the Greater Sunrise project, which Australian joint-venture partner Woodside wants developed out of Darwin instead of East Timor.

Centre Alliance senator Rex Patrick, who led a small group of journalists through the camps and their surrounding infrastructure, said "the full extent of China's engagement and ambition (in East Timor) is revealed".

"Australia's refusal to support Timor-Leste's resource development will be seen as a major strategic blunder," Senator Patrick said. "Australia is not just behind in the game, they are playing an entirely different game."

Senator Patrick called on Mr Morrison to step in and facilitate a funding partner for the Greater Sunrise project, with East Timor leaving the door open to a funding deal with China.

The UN Conciliation Commission found last year that building the processing infrastructure in East Timor was unlikely to be commercially viable.

"Australia's involvement in the Tasi Mane project is non-existent," Senator Patrick said. "Meanwhile the Chinese are at least three years ahead of the game, already having erected powerlines to connect an Indonesian-built power station, and a dual carriageway freeway," he said.

"China, working through construction companies that are effectively state-controlled, has made a strategic commitment, designed to foster long-term influence in Timor-Leste.

"They have already committed many millions of dollars in investment and are very clearly ready to proceed further.

"It seems to be a crazy strategy for Australia to resist and sabotage Timor-Leste desires, particularly when the Chinese and Indonesia have already shown a willingness to assist the Timorese."

NSW Liberal senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells — the former international development minister — also called for action, declaring Australia had ceded strategic ground to China.

"During the years of legal dispute over the Timor-Gap treaty and maritime boundaries, while we continued to provide monetary aid, we failed to effectively engage on the ground in Timor-Leste through our development work. In doing so, we ceded strategic ground thereby enabling China to take a much stronger foothold," she said.

The strategic and commercial objectives of the road near Suai — which leads to a dusty village — are showcased with signs banning the use of motorbikes or scooters, despite it being the vehicle of choice for the Timorese.