

Prime Minister Howard, Foreign Policy and National Interest: the case of East Timor's Independence

A Report for the Australian Prime Ministers Centre, Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House

Sarah Hedberg

Australian National Internships Program

21 October 2013

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone at the Australian Prime Ministers Centre at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House for hosting me during my internship and for the support and guidance they provided.

A special thanks to Toni Dam for her insightful comments and suggestions and for reading my many drafts!

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Developments in East Timor reaffirm some of the home truths about Australia's place in the region to which we pointed when we came into office in 1996. The first truth is that foreign policy needs to be based on a clear sense of the national interest and on our values.

John Howard, address to Parliament, 21 September 1999

I Introduction

Throughout his eleven years in office one phrase stood out as the watchword of former Prime Minister John Howard's approach to foreign policy; 'the national interest'. Across a broad range of different and at times conflicting foreign policy initiatives Howard invoked the national interest as both the impetus and justification for his actions. It was a central theme of his speech announcing the peacekeeping force in East Timor. He used it when justifying his decision to turn back the Norwegian freighter *MV Tampa*. National interest was the leitmotif of the Howard Government's approach to foreign policy.

However for Howard national interest was not simply a concept but the modality through which all Australian foreign policy would be conducted. It featured in the titles of the Howard Government's two White Papers on foreign and trade policy, *In the National Interest* (1997) and *Advancing the National Interest* (2003). Howard continuously reiterated that 'Australia's foreign policy is about the promotion of Australia's national interests' (DFAT 1996, p.6). Yet Howard's use of the concept has not received systematic scholarly attention. While often alluded to it is usually immediately dismissed as a chimeric concept used by Howard as a rhetorical flourish or too subjective to be of probative use.

However, the prevalence of national interest throughout the whole of John Howard's prime ministership warrants a reevaluation of the concept and its possible utility in studying Howard's foreign policy. To this end, the paper will first provide a brief overview of the concept of national interest and its use as both a tool of political action and as a tool of analysis. From this overview, two potential approaches will be developed to examine Howard's use of national interest.

The paper will canvass generally the manner in which Howard both defined national interest and utilised it within the political arena. The majority of the paper will then focus on a case study of East Timor and the crisis of independence in 1999 as a means of applying the two approaches. As Howard's baptism by fire in foreign policy arena it provides a perfect juncture to assess Howard's use of national interest.

The first section will focus on Australia's role in the lead up to the independence vote, specifically looking at the letter Howard sent to the Indonesian President Habibie. The purpose of this section will be to take an empirical approach examining the extent to which Howard's aspirational statements regarding national interest were reflected in his actual policy approach.

The second section will follow Howard's decision to send peacekeepers to East Timor and how he utilised national interest to coalesce support for this decision amongst the Australian people. It will examine the more nuanced possibilities of national interest as a means of framing public discourse regarding the imperatives behind Australia's foreign policy.

The concept of national interest

Any discussion of national interest must begin with the fundamental distinction ‘between its uses for the purposes of political action and for those of political analysis.’ (Frankel 1969, p. 720) The former has a long history in its role in structuring national states’ approaches to international politics. As Frankel has suggested ‘[i]t is intimately connected with the institution of the nation state in describing the cluster of values pursued by a state and in discussing them in political argument.’ (1969, p.720) However, its history precedes that of the nation state having its philosophical genesis in the interaction between Rousseau’s idea of the general will and Machiavelli’s *raison d’état*. The first suggests that any organised society is founded on the basis of common and shared interests and the pursuit of those interests is the only legitimate means by which sovereignty can be exercised (Rousseau 1960, p.13). Machiavelli’s idea on the other hand emphasises the importance of maintaining the existence of the state by any means possible (Machiavelli 1961, p.17). These two concepts combined with the birth of the nation state, following the French and American Revolutions, gave rise to the use of national interest as a tool of political action (Burchill 2005, p. 24). That is, a focus on maintaining and protecting the state in line with the common interests of those constituting the nation, which forms the underlying basis of the state.

Equally, national interest is still ‘frequently invoked’ and plays ‘a significant part in the decisions and actions taken by the various states.’ (Frankel 1969, p. 720) In contemporary usage the term is underpinned by three basic assumptions. While the validity of these assumptions may not be accepted, there is nevertheless consensus that they are the foundational claims made of national interest (Burchill 2005, pp.26-28). The first, which draws explicitly on Rousseau’s point is that the members of any given society have a number of interests in common. This is generally framed as an interest in the survival of the state, seen in terms of both its security and its economic viability. The second point is that these interests are permanent and ‘do not change with transient governments.’ (Burchill 2005, p.27)

The third, drawing on Machievalli's idea, is that governments are the agents through which national interest is implemented.

Far more contentious is its use as a tool of political analysis. From the first substantial inquiry into the concept by Charles Beard in 1934 national interest has been used extensively as an analytical tool but indeterminately. One thread of thought concerning national interest is focused on attempting to substantively define it. In pursuing this aim these approaches essentially become self-fulfilling. For instance, Hans Morgenthau developed an objective approach whereby, 'national interest is deduced by the analysis of the behavior of states' creating a tautology whereby national interest is simply what states do (Frankel 1969, pp.720-721). On the other hand, a subjective approach suffers from a similar malady, analysing decision-making such that 'national interest becomes [simply] what the decision-makers decide it is' (Frankel 1969, p.721). Using analysis to discern a concrete definition of national interest seems futile especially if undertaken in empirical terms by studying state actions.

Other approaches, such as Frankel's have sought to categorise the underlying interests that feed in to the overarching concept of national interest (1969, p. 721). He suggests three categories: aspirational, operational, and explanatory and polemical. The aspirational encompasses an 'ideal set of [interests] which the state [or government] would like to realize [if it] were possible' (Frankel 1969, p.721). At the operational level the concern is with the policies actually pursued by the government. The explanatory and polemical category examines how national interest 'is used to explain, evaluate, rationalize, or criticize international behavior' (Frankel 1969, p.722). Some have suggested these are artificial distinctions that would overlap quite significantly in practice resulting in confusion rather than illumination (Fernandes 2013). However, both clear examples of the categories as well as instances where they overlap can arguably provide different kinds of illumination

regarding the practical uses of national interest. As such, this analytical approach certainly helps to clarify the various types of interests that contribute to wider national interest, and to this extent they can be utilised not to define national interest but rather to explore its role in government actions.

The underlying issue with past approaches is their attempt to imbue what is essentially a fluid construct with firm boundaries that define what does and does not make up its substantive content. To overcome this difficulty the focus can be shifted to assessing how governments actually employ the term. There are two possibilities in this regard. Firstly, in line with Frankel's aspirational category an analysis can be undertaken of a government's own definition of national interest. The inter-relationship between the aspirational and operational can then be examined to gain understanding of the political dynamic between the two.

Alternatively, the third explanatory and polemical category can be utilised. The focus is on the manner in which it is used as a device of political rhetoric. That is, the political utility of invoking the national interest. By reason of both its philosophical antecedents and history the concept is imbued with a degree of legitimacy, such that pursuing the national interest is perceived as a legitimate political goal. As such, '[i]t is used less to describe and prescribe than to prove oneself right and one's opponents wrong.' (Frankel 1969, p.722) The question is to what extent governments realise this and draw on national interest as a means of rationalising their various actions.

With these two approaches in mind, the following section will provide an overview of the Howard government's understanding of national interest.

II Howard's foreign policy and national interest

For Howard and his Government national interest formed the core of their stated approach to foreign policy. On coming to office in 1996 the new Government commissioned the first ever White Paper on Australia's foreign and trade policy. The resulting document *In the National Interest* (DFAT 1997) is an important starting point for seeking to understand how the Howard Government defined their concept of national interest. This includes addressing both what the Government saw as the nature of national interest and the underlying interests that constituted the broader concept. In terms of the nature of national interest the paper made two points. The first and central point is that the pursuit of national interest was the primary purpose of Australia's foreign policy. *In the National Interest* made clear that Australia's foreign policy was focused 'overwhelmingly on a hard headed assessment of Australia's national interest' (Cotton & Ravenhill 2001, p.11). It elevated the concept from a consideration influencing foreign policy to a driving force behind foreign policy development. Secondly it was made clear that national interest was enduring. As the paper stated '[t]he national interest does not change with a change of Government.' (DFAT 1997, p.iii)

The paper then went on to define the interests that constituted the national interest.

The first group was security and economic interests:

Preparing for the future is not a matter of grand constructs. It is about the hard-headed pursuit of the interests which lie at the core of foreign and trade policy: the security of the Australian nation and the jobs and standard of living of the Australian people. In all that it does in the field of foreign and trade policy, the Government will apply this basic test of national interest. (DFAT 1997, p. iii)

The second group revolved around the idea of advancing Australian values. This included, on one hand, values which reflected what the paper termed Australia's 'predominantly European intellectual and cultural heritage' such as liberal democracy and 'a fair go' (DFAT 1997, p.11). On the other hand, it encompassed concern for human rights. However, the paper made clear that concern about human rights would be approached practically with due regard for Australia's bilateral relationships (DFAT 1997, pp. 13-14)

All of these ideas fit neatly within the basic conception of national interest outlined earlier. *In the National Interest* appears to deliberately appeal to these assumptions, such as the focus on security and economic interests, the durability of national interest and the underlying idea that all people within a national body have interests in common. This conformity appears deliberate in that it reinforces the legitimacy of the Howard Government's specific approach to national interest.

This is not to say the Howard Government's employment of the term was gratuitous. The decision to frame their foreign policy in terms of national interest was a calculated move aimed at reflecting the Howard Government's larger policy goals. Importantly it provided the mechanism by which the Howard government sought to distinguish their approach from that of Keating and earlier Labor Governments. The latter's focus had been on big picture thinking aimed at cementing Australia's place in Asia and developing its role as middle power. Whereas Howard decidedly framed his position in terms of a sceptical approach to foreign policy focused on security and economic interests. National interest reflected this position and provided the concept to underpin a foreign policy aimed at careful bilateralism and economic concerns rather than 'grand constructs' and multilateral diplomacy. This forms the aspirational aspect of Howard's national interest which will be used in the following section to assess whether these ideas were borne out in Howard's policy decisions.

Simultaneously, Howard recognised the value of the explanatory and polemical dimension of national interest. While, as suggested above, the government had a clear view of national interest they also realised the value in only explicitly outlining their most basic assumptions underlying national interest and going no further in defining it publicly. This furnished the term with a degree of inoffensive vagueness that arguably provided room for the government to manoeuvre whilst still being able to invoke the national interest as a means of legitimisation. If Howard had more stringently defined what national interest was, it would have necessarily limited the range of options available to him. Rather, he realised that the political utility of national interest lay in its malleability.

In practice this meant that while national interest was constantly reiterated as the underlying goal of the Howard Government's foreign policy, there was little attempt to give the idea further substance beyond the definition contained within *In the National Interest*. Nonetheless, the concept became pervasive in legislation and reforms during the early years of the Howard Government. In 1996, the Government undertook a review of Australia's treaty making process adding a requirement for a National Interest Analysis (NIA) to be attached to each treaty tabled in parliament. In the *Guidelines for National Interest Analyses* it was suggested that NIAs should '[a]ddress the advantages and disadvantages to Australia of taking the proposed treaty action'. As Fernandes has suggested this essentially makes the concept of national interest highly subjective (2013). While this forms the basis of Fernandes criticism of the concept, it is arguably in line with the intentions of the Howard government. The motivation for using national interest in this way was that it provided room to maneuver within the very broad ambit provided by the White Paper. At the same time it rhetorically acted to legitimise any actions taken in that it is not being done in the interest of the government of the day or even a specific interest group but is in the national interest and hence in line with the needs of all Australian people.

This was again made apparent in the Broadcasting Services Amendment Bill (No. 4) 1999 which sought to regulate the broadcasting of international content in Australia. The Bill granted the relevant minister the power to ‘determine whether an international broadcasting service is likely to be contrary to the national interest.’ (Broadcasting Services Amendment Bill 1999, Explanatory Memorandum) If the minister decided it was not in Australia’s interest, it gave rise to a number of powers in relation to international broadcasters’ licenses. As Minister for the Arts Peter McGauran’s introduction to the bill made clear, national interest was the bill’s governing concern and yet it was not defined beyond suggesting the minister should ‘have regard.... to the likely effect of the service on Australia’s international relations.’ (Commonwealth of Australia 1999, p.13196). Thereby giving the minister unfettered discretion under the legitimising power of national interest.

As Burke has argued, Howard effectively defined national interest in such a way as to ‘to create an overarching structure of Cartesian certitude within which more nuanced forms of governmentality could be deployed.’ (2001) For Howard the political utility of national interest lay in that it could be used to justify a broad range of sometimes conflicting policy goals and outcomes without jeopardising the political credibility of his Government. It essentially meant he could maintain, at all times, a broad range of policy options.

The following case study will explore both the aspirational, and explanatory and polemical categories of national interest. The aspirational category will be applied to Howard’s decision to send Indonesian President Habibie a letter outlining Howard’s suggested plan for the autonomy package. The purpose of the analysis being to determine the inter-relationship between Howard’s aspirational statement of national interest and the operational policy decisions pursued by Howard. Secondly, the explanatory and polemical category will be examined in light of Howard’s decision to send a peacekeeping force to East

Timor and the way in which he utilised the certitude provided by invoking the national interest as means of controlling the public debate over the decision.

III East Timor Case Study

Background

In July 1975, Portugal withdrew as colonial administrator from the territory of East Timor (DFAT 2001, p.2). By December of that year Indonesian military forces had brutally invaded and by mid-1976 President Suharto had signed a Bill on integration making East Timor Indonesia's twenty-seventh province (DFAT 2001, p. 3). The Australian government never outright accepted Indonesia's invasion and occupation of East Timor, nor did it ever describe it as anything more than an 'irritant' to Australian-Indonesian relations. Rather, there was a long standing thread of bipartisan accord on East Timor borne out of both parties' recognition that Indonesia was 'fundamentally important' to Australian foreign relations (DFAT 1997, p. 61). As the largest country in Australia's near vicinity Indonesia was regarded as a 'key determinant' in ensuring Australia's security (DFAT 1997, p.vi) and despite intermittent concern being raised over human rights abuses in East Timor, Australia's relationship with Indonesia was viewed as paramount and one best served by not interfering.

'New Possibilities'

At the beginning of 1998 the Howard Government's foreign policy was still clearly focused on Indonesia. Both Howard and his Foreign Minister Alexander Downer had made repeated

statements highlighting the importance of Australian – Indonesian relations and efforts were undoubtedly directed at maintaining the stability of Suharto’s regime in light of the Asian Financial Crisis (DFAT 2001, p.14) In late 1997, the crisis had hit Indonesia severely and Australia contributed funds and exerted serious efforts in lobbying the International Monetary Fund to ensure they, under US pressure, did not criticise Suharto too harshly.

However, by early 1998 the fiscal situation in Indonesia was becoming increasingly dire leading to unprecedented civil unrest. By May 1998 President Suharto had been forced to resign and was replaced by B. J. Habibie. To Australian onlookers this signaled a ‘fundamental chang[e] in the Indonesian political dynamic’ and was regarded with both excitement and trepidation within the government and public service (Cotton 2001, p.214). Nonetheless, ‘the Australian government was firmly focused on maintaining a workable relationship with Indonesia’ (Henry 2013, p.4). Even before Suharto’s resignation Prime Minister Howard had signaled that it would not affect relations which were ‘important beyond the tenure in office of any particular individuals’ (Barker 1998).

At the same time, the possibility that this major political upheaval might allow a re-opening of the East Timor question had not gone unnoticed. In May 1997 the Labor Opposition changed their policy stance on the issue in support of the East Timorese’s right to self-determination (Cotton 2001, p.214). The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had also written to Habibie following Suharto’s resignation urging him to reconsider the East Timor issue (Greenless & Garran 2002, p.35). Even within the Indonesian government there was a clear belief that an opportunity had arisen to finally address the issue of East Timor. While Habibie wanted to maintain the ‘status quo’ he did not share Suharto’s ‘immovable views’ on the need to keep East Timor as part of Indonesia. (Henry 2013, p.5) In early June, Foreign Minister Ali Alatas went to Habibie with a revived proposal he had first put to Suharto ‘for an offer of autonomy [for East Timor] as a compromise to demands for self-determination.’

(Greenless & Garran 2002, p.37) Surprisingly, Habibie and his cabinet endorsed the proposal despite Habibie earlier stating that he would not reconsider the issue (Henry 2013, p.5). On June 9 1998, Habibie announced publicly, and to the surprise of many, that he would consider special status for the East Timorese in return for recognition of Indonesian sovereignty (DFAT 2001, p.17).

The Australian response lay somewhere between caution and enthusiasm. On one hand, many questioned whether Habibie had the political clout to deliver on his promise and saw the offer as a harbinger of increased political instability (Henry 2013, p.6). On the other, it offered a clear opportunity for Australia to rid itself of this long term ‘irritant’ to Australian-Indonesia relations. The consensus, however, was that inaction was now impossible. For the remainder of 1998, the focus was still on the primary goal of maintaining positive bilateral relations but, within the limits set by Habibie, to support the offer of East Timorese special status. To this end, Downer authorised DFAT to undertake a survey of East Timorese opinion, convinced that success and international acceptance of the offer lay in East Timorese involvement (DFAT 2001, p.26). This attempt and others remained largely ignored by the Indonesian government who continued to rely on tripartite talks with Portugal and the UN. In the end, whether for reasons of growing instability in East Timor or simply a desire by Downer and Howard to be involved, they decided to write directly to Habibie.

The Habibie Letter: Aspirational and Operational national interest

The letter Howard sent to Habibie in December 1998 is generally considered a defining moment in Australia’s involvement in the East Timor issue, the central point of debate is whether the outcome of the letter was in line with Howard and Downer’s intentions. In the letter itself Howard proposed a series of solutions to the East Timor issue in light of

Habibie's offer (Howard 1998). The underlying assumption was that the current approach was both futile and blind to the reality of East Timorese sentiment. The first suggestion reiterated Australia's stance that any attempt at East Timorese autonomy must involve 'direct negotiations between Indonesia and East Timorese leaders' in order to 'wi[n] acceptance' both within East Timor and in the wider international community. The second suggestion was premised on the idea that the majority of East Timorese desired self-determination and were unlikely to accept autonomy. To this end, Howard proposed a 'review mechanism' which would offer autonomy with a deferred option to consider self-determination at some later point. Howard went on to suggest the Matignon Accords between France and New Caledonia as a potential model.

The letter is useful in understanding the way in which Howard realised the aspirational aspects of national interest within an operational policy situation. Firstly, given the context of the letter, there is an implicit consideration of national interest rather than an outright statement of it. Nevertheless, there is a clear line of thought in the letter concerned with security and the potential instability that could result if East Timor was not handled properly. As Henry has noted 'Australia's strategic objective [was to reduce] the international profile of East Timor so that it did not damage Indonesia's reputation or interfere with its access to international financing', an outcome likely to cause further destabilisation in Indonesia (Henry 2013, p.13). The letter did this by advocating both a path to autonomy that would include the East Timorese and a long-term solution that would defer the issue until Indonesia had regained the political stability to deal with it. Indeed, the underlying aim of the letter seems to lie in convincing Indonesia that more needed to be done to ensure East Timor did not become a major security issue. As such, the letter appears to privilege what the Howard Government had termed 'economic and security' interests. Similarly, the letter takes

a placatory tone toward Indonesia. This is undoubtedly based on a calculated move aimed at not offending Indonesia and jeopardising Australia's bilateral relationship.

On the other hand there is a degree of ambiguity regarding elements within the letter that could be regarded as pursuing Australia's values. For instance, the suggestion relating to the self-determination mechanism is framed in such a way as to leave open myriad possibilities by which it could be accomplished. As such, it does not commit Australia to a position of supporting self-determination. Rather it is put in such a way that self-determination is viewed as necessary for security reasons rather than humanitarian concerns. While the letter reflects Howard's aspirational statement of national interest it is qualified to the extent necessary given the context, economic and security issues are clearly privileged over the more value-centered concerns with self-determination.

Howard signed the letter on 19 December and it was dispatched to John McCarthy, the Australian Ambassador to Indonesia, who was tasked with delivering the letter to Habibie. While the meeting apparently took place in 'good humour' Habibie took offence at the reference to the Matignon Accord (Greenless & Garran 2002, p.76). He viewed the Accord as colonial agreement and disliked the comparison between New Caledonia and East Timor. Three weeks later the letter was leaked to the press and the Government was forced to publicly discuss this 'historic' policy shift. Downer made it clear that the government

Would see it as more convenient for East Timor to be part of Indonesia. In the case of the present Australian Government our view is that if East Timor were suddenly to become independent, there would be a risk of a fragmentation of other parts of Indonesia. So our preference would be for an arrangement where East Timor would have a high degree of autonomy but remain legally part of Indonesia. (Downer 1999)

Downer saw the ‘thrust of the government’s initiative [as]... help[ing] find a way to make autonomy an acceptable compromise’ (Greenless & Garran 2002, p.88). He made it clear that Australia would ‘continu[e] to recognise Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor’ (Downer 1999b). In Downer’s statement there is a much more overt conception of the national interest than in the letter. In that he clearly suggests the policy change aligns with Australia’s interests. This is partly due to the context. The letter was aimed at convincing Indonesia of the approach they should take whereas the statements made by Downer are a clear attempt at damage control for the Australian people. Downer was faced with news headlines such as ‘Australia Changes Policy On East Timor Self Determination’ (Dow Jones 1999) and ‘Australia backs East Timor self-determination’ (Reuters 1999) and a sense that the government had just taken a destabilising 180 degree about turn on their former stance. Downer’s articulation of the Government’s policy position was clearly aimed at trying to convince Australians that the Government had only changed their position incrementally in order to best pursue the national interest. As in the letter, the concern is once again with security and economic issues and a downplaying the self-determination aspect.

As anticipated above, the approach taken by Downer reflects an overlap between the different categories of interest. While Downer’s statements has a clear sense of the aspirational interests set forth in the White Paper, the aim behind the statements plays on the possibility of the explanatory and polemical category as well. There is an awareness in Downer’s statement that if he makes implicit appeals to the national interest, the policy change is more likely to be accepted by the Australian people.

Habibie was soon to throw this position into turmoil when in January 1999 he distributed Howard’s letter to five ministers. In the margins he had written that ‘if, after 22 years, the East Timorese cannot feel united with the Indonesian people... it would be reasonable and wise ...[to] be honorably separated from the unitary nation of the Republic of

Indonesia' (Habibie 1999) This decision on self-determination was approved by the Cabinet and announced publicly on 27 January 1999. The Australian reaction was understandably one of shock. As Henry noted 'Habibie's audacity was surpassed only by his courage in making a decision that posed such significant risks for civil-military relations in Jakarta.' (2013, p.13) Australia was now tasked with deciding how they would respond.

In one sense, Habibie's decision was delivered in such a way that Australia had little choice whether to support it or not. As one of the senior officials in Prime Minister and Cabinet, Peter Varghese suggested '[w]e had no option but to go along with it... we were really stuck with it!' (Varghese 2012) Initial reactions were positive. Immediately following Habibie's announcement Downer issued a statement saying 'I welcome the willingness that Indonesia is now demonstrating to take account of the wishes of the East Timorese themselves' (Downer 1999c). Howard was also initially supportive suggesting that his letter had 'played no small role' in Habibie's decision (Howard 1999).

However the complex reality of the situation soon had Howard warning of the 'inherent instability' and 'economic and strategic vulnerability' the process could herald (Howard 1999). Australia realised that they would have to carefully handle the situation. On one hand, Habibie's decision provided Australia with the luxury of being more open in their support for East Timorese self-determination. At the same time and despite Habibie's decision to allow the East Timorese the choice, Australia could not be too ardent in supporting independence or they would risk their relationship with Indonesia. Moreover, Habibie's announcement would likely refocus international attention on East Timor and Indonesia ensuring that Indonesia's handling of the issue would become a 'litmus test for its standing in the international community.' (Henry 2013, p. 13) Should it fail this test, there were huge ramifications for the continuing stability of Indonesia. As such, Australia's

economic and security interests were intimately tied up with human rights concerns. The key was in providing the right balance.

In the end, the Howard government struck an uneasy equilibrium, on one hand making it clear that they were ‘willing backers of a free and unfettered act of self-determination’ in line with their interest of promoting Australian values and human rights (Howard 2012) and on the other, downplaying ‘the mounting evidence that the Indonesian military was complicit in the continuing violence in East Timor’ so as to remain on good terms with Indonesia (Greenless & Garran 2002, p.111).

This approach to Howard’s use of national interest confirms that the aspirational aspects were largely carried through to the operational policy delivery. However, where this approach is most illuminating is in its ability to highlight the weight afforded to different considerations and the extent to which one interest may be prioritised over another. Context appears particularly important in this regard, in that the situation effectively dictates the decision to pursue one interest rather than another. As regards Indonesia, economic and security concerns had always been and were likely to prevail as Australia’s key concern. This is reflected clearly in both the Habibie letter and Downer’s statements. However, changes in context equally affect the balancing of interests. In Australia’s response to Habibie’s about-face the overriding focus was still on economic and security interests but this goal could only be pursued by taking account of the more value-centered interests in ensuring the process took place in a legitimate manner. The manner in which the aspirational translates in to the operational can provide more insight than whether the aspirational in fact becomes operational.

Sending in the Peacekeepers: Explanatory and Polemical national interest

The ballot took place on 30 August 1999, the result announced four days later was resoundingly in support of independence with 78.5% of votes in favour (Cotton 2001, p.223). Celebration was short-lived as militia violence erupted and spread throughout East Timor (The Age, 1999). It soon became clear to international observers that action would need to be taken. The UN, as the organisation overseeing the whole process, immediately starting assessing the possibilities open to it. On 6 September 1999 it sent, with the permission of Indonesia, a group of five ambassadors from the UN Security Council with the apparent aim of convincing Indonesia to allow an international force in East Timor (Greenless & Garran 2002, p.234). Despite these efforts, and those on the part of Secretary General Annan, Habibie refused to countenance an international force in East Timor until after the Indonesian Parliament had ratified the vote. Amid the worsening violence, Annan turned to Australia asking them if they would be willing to lead an International force. Howard agreed immediately. To some extent, this possibility had already been anticipated by Australia. As early as February 1999, the Australia Defence Force had put the Darwin 1st Brigade on alert in case they were required to assist in efforts in East Timor following the vote (Greenless & Garran 2002, p.236).

Despite their willingness to support an international effort, Howard and the National Security Committee identified ‘four vital conditions for a peacekeeping mission to proceed.’ (Greenless & Garran 2002, p.239). The first was that Indonesia would need to agree to the presence of peace keepers. Despite the public outcry over events in East Timor and public sentiment, especially in Australia, urging Howard to do all that was necessary, it was inconceivable that Australia or the UN would go in without Indonesian acceptance. As Howard indicated, to do so would have been tantamount to an invasion, which would have

been politically impossible and undoubtedly created undue risks to Australian lives (Howard 1999b). The second was the need for cooperation and support from other South-East Asian countries. As Greenless and Garran argue '[t]his would help ease the blow to Indonesian dignity' and facilitate Indonesian acceptance of the plan (2002, p.239). Thirdly, the UN mandate would need to be wide enough to be effective. It would need to go beyond Chapter VI powers under the UN Charter which would only allow maintenance of the peace and actions in self-defence. Instead the mandate would have to be based on Chapter VII allowing more wide-ranging and effective means of enforcement. Finally, Australia realised that it could not effectively carry out the mission without US support.

The first and last of these proved most difficult. The US was initially unwilling to become involved in the East Timor situation. Not only was it not on their strategic radar but the Clinton Administration was still dealing with the fallout over the decision to intervene in Kosovo. Australia had underestimated the unwillingness of America to become involved, leading to a period of tension between the Howard Government and the Clinton administration. However, as the situation worsened and Howard and Downer directed public criticism at Clinton, the Americans eventually capitulated, offering to put pressure on Indonesia to control the situation and if this did not work to contribute to the peacekeeping effort in a 'tangible way' (Howard 1999c). While this fell short of Howard's desire to see US 'boots on the ground' he had nevertheless succeeded in gaining the much needed US support (Howard 2010, p.346).

With the US on side Howard was tasked with gaining regional support for the peacekeeping force. By coincidence, the annual APEC leaders' meeting was being held in Auckland between 12-13 September 1999. This provided Howard with the perfect 'venue for Australian diplomacy' to convince other countries, particularly the Asian ones, to join the multinational force (Cotton 2001, p.223). Howard was partially successful in this attempt.

There was considerable support from Western nations including New Zealand, Britain and Canada. On the Asian front he was less successful, ASEAN nations reacted badly to the suggestion that they required outside forces to deal with their internal problems (Greenless & Garran 2002, p.268). Nevertheless Howard was able to announce on 12 September that the peacekeeping force would have 'a number of participants from the ASEAN area' in particular from Thailand, who supplied a deputy commander and the Philippines (Howard, 1999d). This gave the operation its much needed ASEAN contingent.

Indonesia had also been highly reluctant to allow a peacekeeping force. However, as international pressure grew and support for the peacekeeping mission increased this position became untenable. Not only did Indonesia face harsh international sanctions that could further destabilise the government if they refused to allow foreign intervention but it was becoming increasingly clear that the Indonesian Army could not control the situation. Personally, Habibie realised that accepting the peacekeeping force was the best way to retain his leadership. The international community was effectively 'holding a gun at Habibie's head' (Greenless & Garran 2002, p.261). On the 12 September, he announced his intention to issue an invitation for an international peacekeeping force to be sent to East Timor.

On 15 September 1999 the UN Security Council passed a resolution authorising the peacekeeping force. It was tasked with the mandate of restoring peace and security, assisting the UN mission and providing assistance to humanitarian operations (Kelly 2009, p.510). Australia would command the operation, providing 4,500 troops to the 9,000 strong force.

The Prime Minister, having gained international support for the peacekeeping mission was now tasked with convincing the Australian people. As Howard later wrote, '[i]t is easy now to look back... and play down the potential risks involved at the time... [t]he reality was that we had no way of being certain that there would not be conflict between Australian and

Indonesia soldiers. I certainly was concerned that there would be casualties' (Howard 2010, p. 351). While there was a great deal of public support for providing assistance to the East Timorese, actually sending in troops posed a significant political risk to Howard. Howard was faced not only with convincing the Australia people but directing the narrative so it reflected his own policy goals and approach to foreign affairs.

National interest became the vehicle by which Howard navigated and controlled these potential difficulties. The centrepiece of the analysis to be undertaken here is the speech given by the Prime Minister to Parliament on the 21 September, the day after INTERFET forces had landed in East Timor (Commonwealth of Australia 1999, pp. 10025-10030). After providing an account of the developments leading up to the deployment of INTERFET, Howard turned to address the more theoretical underpinnings of his decision. He framed this entire section with a reaffirmation that the 'first truth is that foreign policy needs to be based on a clear sense of the national interest'. He then went on to deploy a complex interaction of ideas all focused on the national interest, the purpose of this was manifold.

To begin with he connected the national interest with two key ideas, the first being Australian values. The decision to send troops to East Timor essentially created a situation of great uncertainty. At that point in time there was no indication of how successful the mission would be, whether there would be Australian casualties or whether it would cause greater instability in the region. The appeal to values therefore acted as the stabilising core of national interest. Amidst the potential dangers presented by this decision it 'functioned as a promise of continuity' (Burke 2001). This idea was captured succinctly in Howard's speech when he related the story of his visit to Townsville Barracks the night before deployment:

I was also very deeply warmed by the characteristic Australian responses. One of them looked at me as we ate and said, 'Well, John, now I've got you, let me tell you what's wrong

with the Army.' It was so Australian; it was so reassuring; and it was a reminder of the sorts of values that are important to the Australian community.

Just as the soldier 'reassured' John Howard with his 'characteristic Australian response' so too would Howard's appeal to Australian values reassure an Australian public. In Howard's speech, the national interest was intimately connected with Australian values, and whatever might be done in the name of the former, the latter would always provide the necessary certitude to withstand the resulting outcome.

Moreover, it forged the important connection between what was occurring externally to Australia with a clear sense of how it was relevant to each individual Australian. This element was important too, Howard not only had to reassure the Australian public but he also had to contain criticism of his actions. Painting the operation as an intrinsically Australian undertaking, the perfect realisation of Australian national identity and values, created a perfect dichotomy. In effect, any public criticism would not just be leveled at the Government but at the monolith of Australian national identity. Alternatively, any support would reaffirm that Howard's decision was the 'Australian' thing to do.

Secondly, Howard created an important syllogism between national interest and doing what was right. Firstly he clearly equated the national interest with 'doing the right thing', such that if the decision to go to East Timor was the right thing to do then it was in the national interest. Framing the debate in this manner allowed Howard to easily deflect criticism. This was made apparent a few days after the speech when in response to a question from Kim Beazley Howard replied,

So much of what the Leader of the Opposition said in his question reeks of a person who is clutching for some kind of political opening, recognising that on this particular issue this government has been able to achieve an outcome that has done great credit to Australia

internationally, an outcome that is strongly supported in the Australian community, and an outcome that is justified by the two things that should always justify foreign policy approaches: the evident national interest of Australia and the fact that what we are doing is right. What we have done in East Timor is not only in Australia's national interest but is also overwhelmingly right, according to any moral judgment that one would seek to bring to the situation. (Commonwealth of Australia 1999, p. 10745).

Framing the debate in the way he did gave Howard the ability to present Kim Beazley as a political opportunist foiling Howard's own attempts to do what was right for the Australian people. Simultaneously, of course, it gave Beazley very little room to move in terms of continuing to criticise the government's action.

Creating these connections between national interest, values and doing the right thing was an important initial step in allowing Howard to frame the narrative in a manner which reflected his own foreign policy position. The significance being that the decision to intervene in East Timor gave rise to a number of radical departures from Howard's stated approach to foreign policy. Howard appeared to recognise this contradiction and, within his speech, attempted to reconfigure how the operation should be viewed.

The first contradiction lay in the fact that Howard had continuously reiterated the idea that Australia 'does not claim to be Asian' and yet he was faced with a very clear example of Asian regional engagement. Rather than presenting an anomaly, for Howard this was proof that Australia occupied a 'unique intersection—a Western nation next to Asia with strong links to the United States and Europe'. It was Australia's relationship with the UN, Europe and the US that enabled Australia to take the lead in this operation, confirming Howard's position that these relations remained of supreme and enduring importance to Australia. Howard had effectively turned this peacekeeping mission into a reassurance that Australian's could stop

‘worrying about whether we are Asian, in Asia, enmeshed in Asia or part of the a mythical East-Asian hemisphere.’ Instead Australia’s role demonstrated that ‘We ha[d] got on with the job of being ourselves in the region.’

Secondly there was an irony in that ‘the Australian government [made] an unprecedented contribution to global peace enforcement... [despite] the Coalition government’s scepticism regarding the role of the UN’ and indeed multilateralism generally (Cotton 2001, p.234). Howard diffused this tension by suggesting that the peacekeeping mission was first and foremost a vindication of the alliance between Australia and the US. Not only was Australia ‘completely satisfied with the scale of the US contribution’ but it justified Howard’s decision, within his foreign policy approach, to focus his attention on this relationship rather than those in Asia or with the UN.

Finally, Howard’s appeal to the national interest allowed him the flexibility to entertain the various outcomes that could result from the operation and lend legitimacy to each. Most importantly, the operation posed a significant threat to Australia’s relationship with Indonesia. Howard reiterated that ‘Australia has no quarrel with the Indonesian nation. Both countries have an interest in getting on with the other. We share important common interests; we are neighbours’. He went on to suggest that it was in Australia’s ‘interest’ to ensure the political and financial stability of Indonesia. However, he went on to say that ‘national interest cannot be pursued without regard to the values of the Australian community’ and that a good relationship with Indonesia cannot be had at the expense of those values. Nonetheless he concluded that he looked forward to having a close relationship with Indonesia in the future. Howard’s speech creates an interesting oscillation between the two eventualities. Either Australian maintains a good relationship with Indonesia, which is in the national interest or the relationship comes under a degree of strain because Australian values cannot be forsaken, which is also in the national interest. As such, Howard’s use of national

interest is invoked not only to justify the current action but equally to take into account the various outcomes and justify them within the concept as well.

This analysis of national interest provides an interesting insight into how Howard utilised a conceptual approach to political argument. Howard's invocation of national interest creates a site of political legitimacy tied in with notions of Australian values and an inherent sense of rightness of action. Howard skillfully utilised this as a means of creating certainty and simultaneously undermining potential sources of criticism. This in turn gave Howard the political scope to control the broader narrative surrounding his decision to send troops to East Timor. Firstly he was able to manipulate the sequence of events leading up to the decision to reflect his underlying beliefs regarding how Australian foreign policy should be conducted. This is particularly clear in his desire to place the focus on more traditional alliance relations with the US and Europe and underplay the regional nature of the operation. Equally, it allowed Howard to encompass the entire ambit of potential outcomes, and preemptively justify any one of them as pursuant to the national interest. In effect this approach to analysis allows a clear unveiling of Howard's skillful use of national interest as rhetorical tool to continually reinforce the legitimacy of his government's actions.

IV Conclusion

Australia's role in the independence of East Timor contributed to the emergence of a new and unstable nation on Australia's doorstep and a military commitment that would only end some thirteen years later in January 2013. It severely jeopardised Australia's bilateral relationship with Indonesia, which would not recover until after the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004. And yet it is seen as one of Prime Minister Howard's greatest legacies. As he has said, 'When asked to list the achievements of my prime ministership of which I am most proud, I always include the liberation of East Timor' (2010, p.336). It cemented Howard's vision of how Australian

foreign policy should be conducted and marked the point at which ‘the novice was transformed into a national security leader.’ (Kelly 481) Indeed, the remainder of Howard’s prime ministership and, in particular, its renewed focus on Australian militarism and the way he engaged with Asia, would be incomprehensible without East Timor.

Viewing the events surrounding East Timor’s independence through the lens of national interest provides one means to more fully comprehend the nature of Howard’s role in East Timor. Howard’s decision to employ the notion of national interest was hardly novel. Since the rise of the nation-state, national interest has been frequently invoked as a guiding principle of a state’s actions in international affairs. Rather, the substance lies in how Howard took a basic conception of national interest as deployed as both the impetus and justification for his foreign policy.

By placing it at the very centre of his vision for Australian foreign policy, Howard made a clear statement about the elevated role national interest would play in his Government. The 1997 White Paper presented a vision of national interest as the pursuit of economic and security interests orchestrated by underlying concern for ‘Australian’ values. The dynamic between this aspirational statement and how, in operational terms, policy was pursued proves an insightful means of understanding Howard’s approach to foreign policy. Howard’s letter to Habbibie illuminates the manner in which various interests come into play and are prioritised depending on the circumstances. National interest provides the means of understanding the important dynamic between the stated approach to foreign policy and in practical terms, its actual realisation.

Equally, national interest and its use at an explanatory and polemical level elucidates Howard’s rationalisation of his decision to send peacekeepers to East Timor. In Howard’s speech to Parliament national interest became the means of maintaining certitude in his

actions and their outcomes. National interest uncovers the rhetorical maneuvering Howard deployed to control the narrative surrounding his foreign policy decisions.

To dismiss Howard's use of national interest as vague and gratuitous risks losing a valuable tool in understanding the thinking behind the Howard Government's foreign policy. The centrality of national interest to his Government's foreign policy architecture ensures that this methodology has relevance beyond East Timor. Equally, East Timor marked a turning point in Howard's prime ministership, in the wake of the operation's success Howard took on the posture of a more confident foreign policy leader. In turn nearly every action taken by Australia in the second half of Howard's prime ministership was galvanised by an appeal to nation interest. It is therefore key to understanding the reasoning behind Howard's decisions.

Finally, this approach may have analytical relevance beyond the realm of foreign policy. Prime Minister Howard used the national interest device in relation to domestic political and economic issues. He invoked the term in relation to national debt when he said 'The national interests would be better served if we would pay off some more of Labor's debt' and again when discussing the sell-off of Telstra (Howard 1999e). In an interview for the 7.30 Report, Howard suggested he went in to GST negotiations with 'regard to the long-term national interest of Australia' (Howard 1999f). National interest became the watchword of the Howard Government, a skilled invocation of their ability to secure Australia's domestic interests in an increasingly globalised world. It is therefore central to understanding the complex thinking behind both Howard's foreign policy and his domestic politics.

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