

The Australian-led mission to East Timor

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The skillful leader subdues his enemies without fighting.

Sun Tsu

Introduction

Several recent international military operations have been criticized, but one success story stands in contrast – the Australian-led mission to East Timor. Australia has a history of seeking to ‘punch above its weight’ with stealth, and battle cunning, backed up with, but not driven by, kinetic capabilities.

Australia’s disciplined, restrained and self-deprecating approach helped bind together a 22-nation coalition of the willing, demonstrating the application of a manoeuvrist philosophy

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adapted for the mass-media information era. The successful result in East Timor, coming after a decade of mixed results in the Balkans and elsewhere, suggests that this innovative method is valid for the military challenges of today and beyond.

However, the similarities and differences with peace support operations in Bosnia, suggest broad lessons need to be applied carefully.

The success in East Timor

One of the most remarkable of the Post-Cold War conflicts occurred in 1999 in the Indonesian-controlled territory of East Timor, shortly after the situation in the Balkans reached a crescendo with the bombing campaign in Kosovo. The reader may wonder why East Timor merits consideration when the focus is on Bosnia. Given the difficulties experienced in other post-Cold War peace support operations, including in Bosnia and Kosovo, the success in East

Timor merits attention and comparison, particularly as it happened when many of the difficult lessons faced by the international community in the Balkans were finally being absorbed. Consequently, it serves as an interesting contrast, a decade after the end of the Cold War, of how some of the lessons, once learnt, could be applied. Like the countries of NATO with regards to Bosnia in the early 1990s, Australia had not considered deploying forces to East Timor until events left them with little option.

Believing it could win, Indonesia agreed to let the United Nations supervise a ballot on the future of East Timor, a former Portuguese colony it had forcibly annexed during the Cold War. On 30 August 1999 the East Timorese voted overwhelmingly in favour of separation from Indonesia. Indonesian-sponsored militia forces raised to help ensure an outcome favourable to Indonesia were let loose in early September in an attempt to spoil the outcome.¹ This

¹ See for instance: James Dunn, *Crimes Against Humanity in East Timor, January to October 1999: Their Nature and Causes*, 14 February 2001 (<http://www.etan.org/news/2001a/dunn1.htm>, downloaded 8 July 2001); Don Greenless and Robert Garra, *Deliverance: The Inside Story of East Timor’s Fight for Freedom*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2002; Ian Martin, *Self-Determination in East Timor: The United Nations, the Ballot, and International Intervention*, Lynnr Reinner

Publishers, Boulder 2001; Damien Kingsbury (ed.), *Guns and Ballot Boxes: East Timor’s vote for independence*, Monash Asia Institute, Clayton, 2000; H. MacDonald et al., *Masters of Terror: Indonesia’s Military and Violence in East Timor in 1999*, Canberra Papers on Defence and Strategy No 145, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Canberra 2002; John Martinkus, *A Dirty Little War*, Random House, Sydney 2001.

situation triggered an Australian-led evacuation operation from 6 to 14 September. Known as Operation *Spitfire*, it used mostly Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) C-130 Hercules aircraft to evacuate hundreds fleeing the terror, including unarmed UN staff and associated East Timorese.

Indonesia appears not to have appreciated just how transparent the events

would appear before the world and by 12 September, facing intense international diplomatic and economic pressure, agreed to accept a UN-mandated international force to restore order.

INTERFET

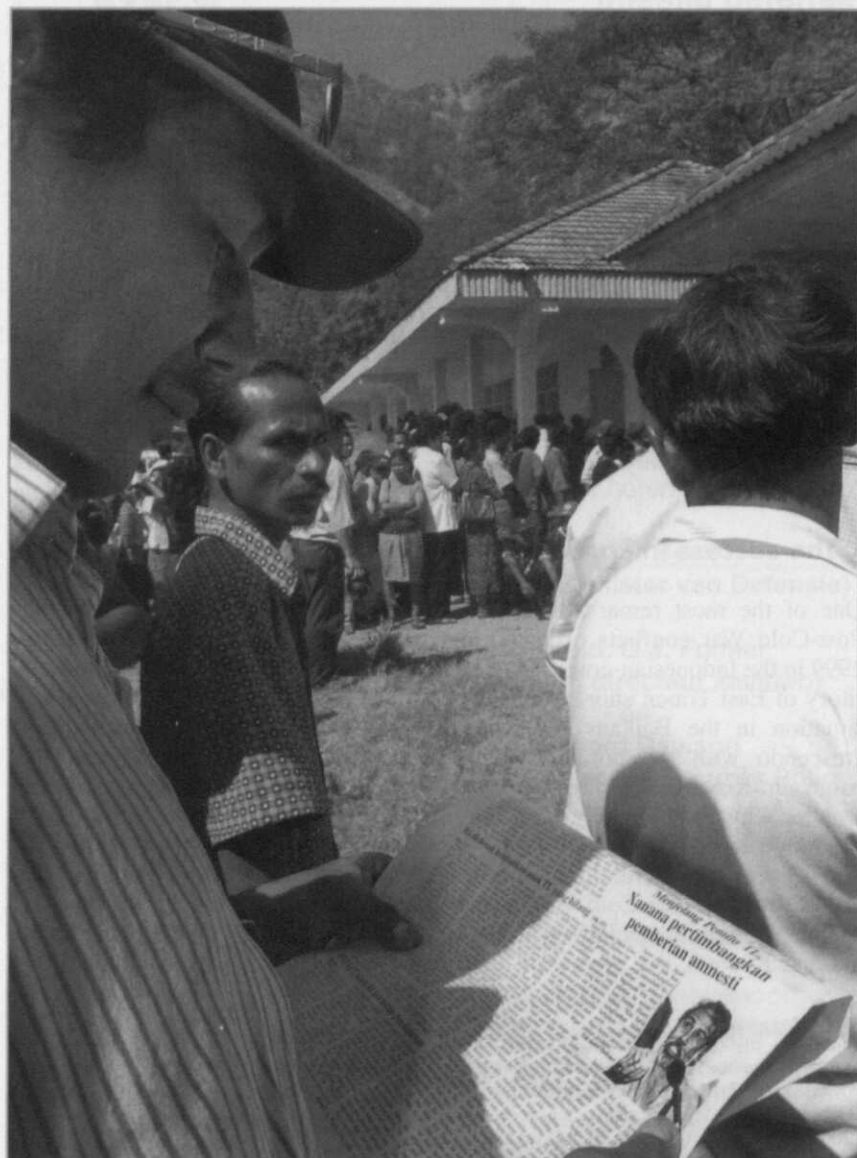
The Australian-led International Force East Timor (INTERFET) under Major General Peter Cosgrove, oper-

ating with a unified command and robust mandate, arrived on 20 September. The Force swiftly restored order in what has been described as a 'by the book' or model operation authorised under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, that has set the benchmark for peace enforcement operations.² Since the handover to the United Nations in February 2000, several publications have been released providing detailed descriptions of the conduct of Operation *Stabilise* in East Timor.³

The Australian Deployable Joint Force Headquarters or DJFHQ (dual-rolled as Headquarters 1st Division) was renamed and expanded to form Headquarters INTERFET, commanding a force of over 11,000 troops from twenty-two countries, including key regional Asian neighbours that added to the credibility of the force.

The initial deployment

The initial deployment into Dili by sea and air consisted primarily of an Australian combined-arms, light-infantry brigade with naval and air supporting elements, special forces, and smaller attached British and New



A unidentified East Timorese voter reads a local newspaper while waiting in a queue for his turn to vote at a school in Dili, 30 August 2001.

East Timor's voters went to the polls Thursday to elect a 'consistuent assembly' which will draw up a constitution in preparation for independence by mid-2002 (Source: EPA/ANP)

² See Ian Bostock, "'By the Book': East Timor - An Operational Evaluation", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 3 May 2000.

³ See for instance Bob Breen, *East Timor, Mission Accomplished*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2001; Alan Ryan, *Primary Responsibilities and Primary Risks - Australian Defence Force Participation in the International Force East Timor*, Study Paper No. 304, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Canberra, November 2000; David Horner, 'Testing the Australian Defence Force, in *Making the Australian Defence Force*, in the series 'The Australian Centenary History of Defence', Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001; and Jeffrey Grey, *The Australian Army*, in the series 'The Australian Centenary History of Defence', Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001.

For a detailed description of the foreign policy background to the events, see *East Timor in Transition 1998-2000: An Australian Policy Challenge*, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, 2000. The economic and national interest dimensions are also explored in Nicholas J. Wheeler and Tim Dunne, 'East Timor and the new humanitarian interventionism', *International Affairs*, vol. 77, no. 4 (2001), pp. 805-27.

Zealand contingents. Initially troops had the responsibility of providing a secure environment in Dili in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1264.

This task involved disarming the militia while avoiding inadvertent confrontation with Indonesian troops still in East Timor – many only grudgingly accepting the force's international mandate. Within three weeks, Dili was secure and a light-infantry brigade had deployed to secure the border with Indonesian West Timor, effectively opening the way for the restoration of basic services, provision of humanitarian assistance and preparations for full independence.

The contribution of 5500 personnel to the East Timor operation at its peak was the largest single deployment by Australian forces since the end of World War II. While the Vietnam War involved a larger overall commitment of Australian forces, that deployment was much more gradual.

Australia, like other countries, including Canada, has willingly contributed joint-force composite battalion groups since the late 1980s for a series of international missions, including those to Namibia, Cambodia, Somalia and Rwanda. Australian troops had acquitted themselves well and many lessons had been learnt, but the scale and scope of the East Timor mission was beyond anything previously entertained by Australian planners.

Australia's contribution

For a medium-sized power, Australia features prominently on the world map, but like with Canada, the size of its land mass belies its limited economic and military power and influence.⁴ The Australian Defence Force has long taken pride in being a relatively high-technology force in a low-technology neighbourhood. In addition, the small population base has long driven Australian defence planners' thinking towards fighting smarter – 'punching above our weight'.

During World War II, Australia contributed to Allied efforts to outsmart enemies with such 'soft' capabilities as psychological operations, intelligence operations, deception and electronic warfare.⁵ During the Vietnam War, Australian commanders were always conscious of the need to conserve limited manpower, and fight as efficiently and effectively as possible by applying its more stealthy and less firepower-intensive tactics – away from the more heavy-handed US forces.⁶

Australia's experience in fighting in the nearby South-West Pacific and former Dutch East-Indies in World War II and thereafter in such places as Malaya, Borneo and Vietnam intensified concerns about the effects of military actions on relations with neighbours. Consequently, Australian diplomats, politicians and comman-

ders have often weighed the long-term political ramifications of military action against short-term expediency.

While prepared to apply kinetic force – or firepower – when necessary, and structuring its defence force accordingly to include tanks, warships and fighter-bombers, Australia has always looked for ways to achieve its military objectives with minimal collateral damage. It has sought to keep its own casualties to a minimum and to contain the negative effects of forceful action on the nation's long-term strategic interests, including its relations with its neighbours.

Advances in information technology have been touted as triggering the most recent Revolution in Military Affairs,⁷ and the term Information Operations has sprung into use along with it in the late 1990s, in recognition of the wider use of information in peacekeeping and crisis management.⁸

Information Operations has also been referred to in Australia as 'shaping and influencing'.⁹ By the late 1990s, many in the Australia Army had already learnt to think about military operations in ways appropriate for the Information Era. To most, that understanding is encapsulated in a manoeuvre warfare' mindset – avoiding hard spots and going for the soft spots, or 'gaps', to achieve a mission – where speedy and informed decision-

⁴ With a GDP of US\$ 416.4 billion, Australia is ranked as only the fourteenth largest economy in the world. See *The World in 2000*, Economist Intelligence Unit, London.

⁵ See, for instance, Judy Thomson, *Winning With Intelligence*, Australian Military History Publications, Sydney, 2000.

⁶ Australia committed an infantry battalion to fight alongside the 173rd US Airborne Brigade in Bien Hoa in South Vietnam in 1965. The experience disturbed Australian commanders, who were concerned to reduce casualties and more effectively implement the Australian tactics of stealthy jungle patrols and ambushing. By 1966 Australia had increased its deployed force to an independent combined-

arms infantry brigade in addition to its air and naval contributions. See, for instance, Bob Breen, *First to Fight: Australian Diggers, N.Z. Kiwis and U.S. Paratroopers in Vietnam, 1965-1966*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988; and Ian McNeill, *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1950-1966*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993.

⁷ See, for instance Alvin and Heidi Toffler's seminal work *War and Anti-War: Making Sense of Today's Global Chaos*, Warner Books, New York, 1993.

⁸ The Australian Defence Force has sought to define Information Operations into three components: offence, defence and support. Offensive Information Operations is defined

as including: Electronic Attack (EW), Psychological Operations, Deception, Computer Network Attack, and Destruction. Defensive Information Operations includes: Information Assurance, Counter-intelligence, Counter Deception, Physical Security, Operational Security, Electronic Protection (EW), and Counter PSYOPS. Support Information Operations includes: Intelligence; Electronic Support (EW); Public Information; Civil Affairs; Information Management; Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence (C3I) Systems Infrastructure; and Situational Awareness.

⁹ E-mail correspondence with author from Lieutenant Colonel Mark Smethurst, 26 July 2001.

making is considered critical to maximise fighting power and minimise casualties.¹⁰

As the East Timor crisis unfolded, the international media had an important role to play in East Timor and helped to extend the political fallout during the crisis. Australian government policy had long placed high priority on good relations with Indonesia and therefore wished to avoid a confrontation that would harm that relationship.

However, widespread revulsion at what was being reported from East Timor compelled the Australian Government to act, mustering international support to pressure Indonesia to stop the carnage and wanton destruction, and let an international force assume responsibility in East Timor. At the same time, the Australian Defence Force appreciated that the situation could become more problematic if the force was to sustain significant casualties. Limited military logistics raised concerns about the prospects of sustaining the mission, should the situation in East Timor descend into a protracted conflict.¹¹

The Australian Government

The Australian Government's policy of engagement with Indonesia was

¹⁰ Popular books read and absorbed by junior Australian Army officers in the mid 1990s included William Lind's *Maneuver Warfare Handbook*; and Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver-Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle*, Presidio Press, Novato, CA, 1991.

¹¹ E-mail correspondence from Lieutenant Colonel Mark Smethurst with author, 27 July 2001.

¹² Ryan, *Primary Responsibilities and Primary Risks*, p. 39; and Horner, *Making The Australian Defence Force*, pp. 1417.

¹³ Breen, *Mission Accomplished*, pp. 23-4.

¹⁴ Ryan, *Primary Responsibilities and Primary Risks*, p. 17.

¹⁵ P.J. Cosgrove, 'The ANZAC Lecture at Georgetown University', Washington D.C., 4 April, 2000.

being de-railed, but the crisis brought together the government ministers from the Department of Defence, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Attorney-General's Department, as well as the Prime Minister, John Howard, in the National Security Committee of Cabinet. They met regularly at the peak of the crisis and consulted with senior officials, including the Australian Chief of the Defence Force, Admiral Chris Barrie.

The personal involvement of the Prime Minister in the crisis meant that the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet had *de facto* leadership, but how to divide responsibilities remained undetermined.¹² In effect they were validating Clausewitz's key dictum that military operations are 'an extension of politics by other means'.

At the highest levels, for instance, the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Australia engaged potential mission partners at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum, fortuitously being held in New Zealand at the peak of the crisis. In the meantime, the Vice Chief of the Defence Force, Air Marshall Doug Riding, visited several South-East Asian countries, seeking contributions from long-time regional partners. The personal nature of the Vice Chief's negotiations helped shape the operation as he overcame many of the misunderstandings in South-East Asia that were arising as INTERFET was being assembled.

Clearly the task of forming a coalition force at short notice presented Australian officials with enormous challenges that required cooperation and a degree of mutual understanding – itself something of a challenge given the different departmental cultures of Defence and Foreign Affairs.

The cultural difference in Australia between Foreign Affairs and Defence was negligible when compared with the cultural differences between INTERFET, the militia groups and their

Indonesian military backers in East Timor.

A four-phase campaign

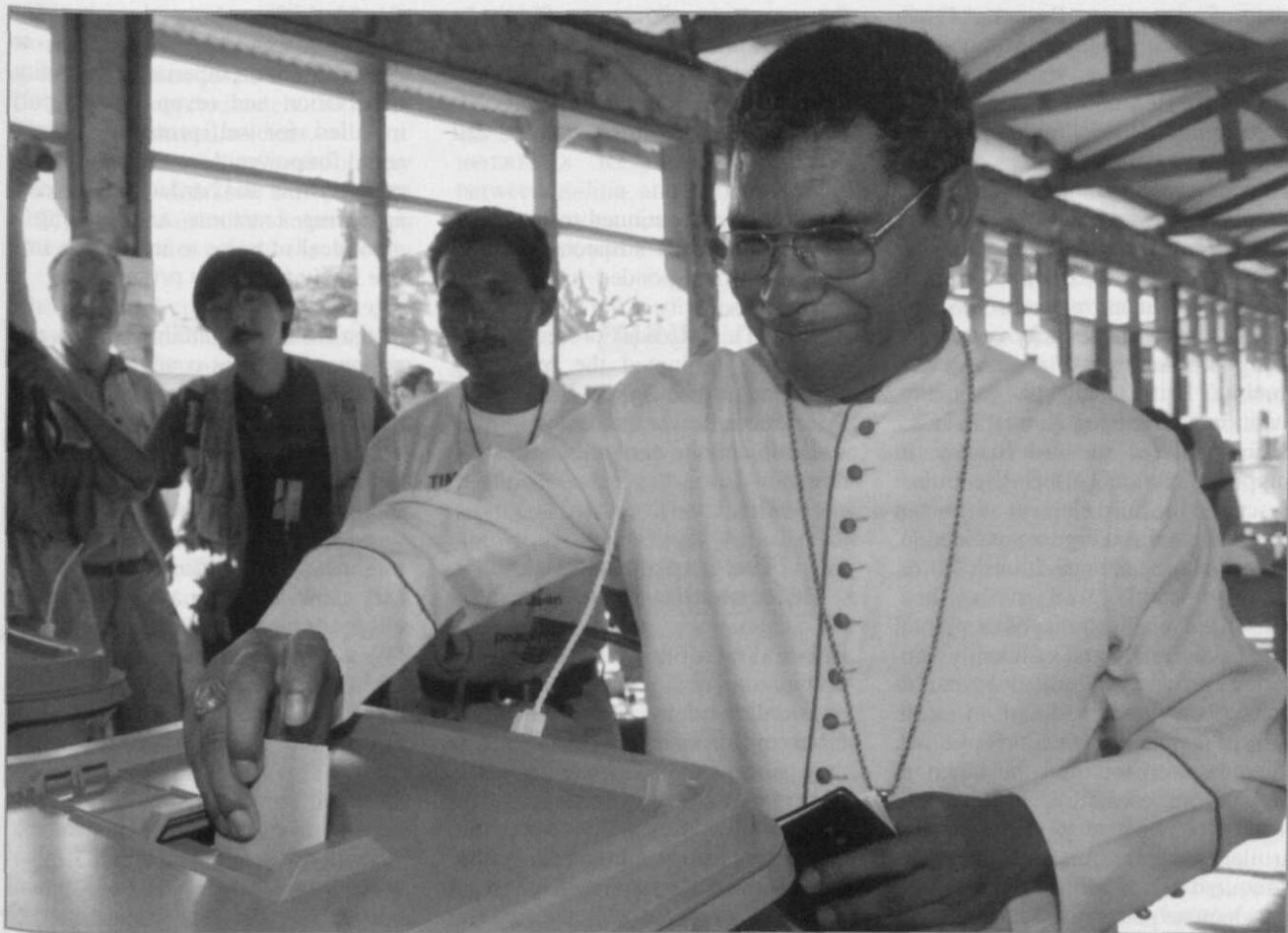
The Commander directed a four-phase campaign in East Timor with specific but limited objectives. The first phase was the negotiation with the Indonesian force commander, Major General Kiki Shyanakri, to establish safe conditions for lodgment.

The second phase involved the rapid lodgment of the necessary combat forces. The third phase concerned the establishment of a secure environment in Dili and then throughout East Timor.

The final phase involved the transition of INTERFET to a UN peace enforcement operation. The security of INTERFET troops was the highest priority for each phase. Major General Cosgrove also committed the force to facilitate humanitarian aid to relieve the suffering of thousands of displaced East Timorese as quickly as possible.¹³

When INTERFET troops deployed to East Timor on 20 September 1999, they encountered minimal armed resistance, but they had to be prepared to fight in order to uphold their mandate under UN Security Council Resolution 1264. The maintenance of a high level of preparedness proved a potent deterrent to aggression, particularly in the first few hours when the still heavily outnumbered INTERFET troops were most vulnerable.

Furthermore, the collapse of the militia forces had as much to do with the knowledge that they faced a sharp and determined response as it did with the purported withdrawal of Indonesian military support and patronage.¹⁴ As Major General Cosgrove noted, a less robust 'force optimised for peace-keeping would have in my view invited more adventurous behaviour by our adversaries'.¹⁵



Dili Bishop D. Ximenes Belo casts his vote on Thursday, 30 August 2001, during the first East Timor elections for constitutional assembly in Dili, East Timor (Source: EPA/ANP)

The naval and air components were also prepared for other contingencies should the situation have deteriorated. The maritime forces deployed with INTERFET were assigned the 'mission to act as an air-defence screen and to provide back-up if the lodgment did not go according to plan or was opposed'.¹⁶

The presence of the US Navy's Aegis cruiser USS *Mobile Bay*, the Royal Navy's destroyer HMS *Glasgow* and the Royal Australian Navy's FFG-7

frigates provided air-warfare sensors and weapons that gave reassurance to the land forces. Naval-force protection also helped sustain the troops ashore since it enabled merchant shipping to deliver 90 per cent of the cargo landed.

The presence and contribution of the Royal Australian Navy helped shape the operational climate, bolster INTERFET's confidence and ability, and influence outcomes positively, especially in the first critical days of the operation.

Air support

Also crucial for the lodgment and sustenance of the force was air support, particularly with regard to surveillance, and the provision of airfield services in Dili and at East Timor's

second airport, Baucau. A recent media report also suggests that Australian F/A-18 fighters were on readiness patrol and F-111 strike aircraft were on standby in northern Australia.¹⁷

The Chief of the Defence Force was taking every precaution for the safety of INTERFET personnel and assets; a soft-spoken man, he was keen to ensure that his troops had a 'big stick' should that have been required. Fortunately, in the end the land forces did not have to call on air or naval gunfire support.¹⁸

The land component

The land component operations in the first few days revolved around three elements. The first was the establish-

¹⁶ Breen, *Mission Accomplished*, p. 29.

¹⁷ MacDonald, 'East Timor - Revealed: When Australia was forced onto a war footing', *Sydney Morning Herald*.

¹⁸ Horner, *Making the Australian Defence Force*, p. 38.

ment of an INTERFET Response Force presence in the countryside, conducting reconnaissance, maintaining an Immediate Reaction Force and acting as pathfinders for follow-on forces.

This force was a unique international group based around an Australian special forces squadron and including British and New Zealand components. The second element involved the 3rd Brigade's security operations using two Australian infantry battalions, a British Gurkha company, aviation and armour, as well as other components of the 3rd Brigade in support.¹⁹ Colonel Bob Breen has described the third element as 'human and technical intelligence collection, and psychological operations'.²⁰

This third element played a pivotal role in discretely and efficiently vectoring INTERFET's limited resources onto fleeting and difficult-to-locate militia concentrations.²¹ Based on threat assessments and the intent to prevent an escalation of tensions, INTERFET did not deploy tanks, field artillery or anti-aircraft artillery. The armoured vehicles that did deploy had no adequate protection against a variety of threats, including heavy machine-guns, anti-armour weapons and mines.

Armed with this intelligence, focused troops could then weed out the militia forces with precision and throw off balance those contemplating a strike against INTERFET. As Bob Breen has written, having established situational awareness in the first few days of

the operation, INTERFET effectively exploited the decision cycle of the militia groups and their controllers to achieve superiority; conducting 24-hour and air-mobile operations, and dominating Dili.

INTERFET then continued to intervene and to apprehend suspected militiamen; it also responded to threats to peace and security in the Dili area and beyond. This vigorous prosecution of operations prompted the remaining militiamen to leave East Timor while their controllers closed down their communications networks and withdrew.²²

The importance of Information Operations

Before those militia networks closed down, several other incidents occurred that demonstrate the importance of Information Operations as they permeated through various levels of INTERFET's chain of command. In the first few days of the operation, Indonesian troops continued to gather in East Timor's capital, Dili, from outlying areas while the militia groups continued sporadic activity around Dili.

Sensing that a deterioration in the security situation was possible, the brigade commander sought to pre-empt any increase in hostile actions by applying disciplined and restrained combat power for a psychological effect. He directed that all available rotary-wing and fixed-wing aircraft

should deploy above the city. The brigade commander's plan was to demonstrate air superiority, mobility, observation and (even though only installed for self-protection) some aerial firepower. Aircraft were directed to fly low and hard across the city, appearing fearsome and making a great deal of noise to intimidate anyone likely to oppose INTERFET.²³

In the meantime, infantry troops and armoured vehicles conducted a 'hammer and anvil'-style sweep through the city. Admittedly, as Bob Breen pointed out, this was an exhilarating but highly disciplined experience for those involved.²⁴ Some people had worried that the presence of armour might escalate conflict, but the adversary saw armour and would not engage. One commentator observed: 'We saw people scared of armour. We often talk about the psychological effects of armour. We saw it in East Timor'.²⁵

Timing...

These efforts paid off handsomely. The energy generated from the initial shock of the rapid deployment enabled the brigade commander to grasp the initiative at a critical juncture. After the initial deployment, the intent of the adversary became unclear. The brigade commander retained the initiative before the initial shock effect could wear off by adopting a suite of measures, such as a series of night-time cordon-and-search actions and sustained overflights of the Dili area using helicopters equipped with forward-looking infra-red (FLIR) equipment.

This operation served to deter anyone trying to undermine the INTERFET mission. It also demonstrated the brigade commander's keen sense of timing and measured use of force to unbalance the adversary.

... and discipline

Similar restraint and keen understanding of the mission's intent was being demonstrated at the grassroots level as well. One 22-year-old Austra-

¹⁹ Breen, *Mission Accomplished*, p. 38.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-4.

²¹ For a discussion of how these elements were employed in 3 Brigade during Operation *Stabilise* see John Blaxland, 'On Operations in East Timor: The Experiences of the Intelligence Officer, 3rd Brigade', *Australian Army Journal*, 2000.

²² Breen, *Mission Accomplished*, pp. 53-4.

²³ Some have argued that this was courting a similar disaster to that which occurred to US forces in Mogadishu in 1993. What marks this incident as different is that, although it entailed risks, it had not been done before in Dili; it did not involve the firing of weapons

from aircraft; it took place in an environment with no heavy weapons in use by militia groups; it was for a short duration only; and arguably, its positive effect justified the limited risk. Arguably, the sweep was deliberately timed to test the waters - to see what the reaction might be - but not to allow sufficient time to organise any form of coordinated reaction. Correspondence with author from Lieutenant Colonel Marcus Fielding and Major Chris Field, 30 July 2001.

²⁴ Breen, *Mission Accomplished*, p. 55.

²⁵ Major Chris Websdane, Officer Commanding, C Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, 2000.

lian platoon commander and his troops handled a potentially inflammatory situation involving an entire battalion of approximately 500 East Timorese territorial soldiers.

These troops, travelling in about sixty trucks loaded with loot, barrelled into Dili, where Australian infantrymen had established a vehicle checkpoint.

The territorial commander refused to show his identification and demanded passage as his troops began taking aim at the Australians. Good judgement and quick thinking were required to defuse a potentially disastrous escalation of tensions. The platoon commander checked with higher headquarters, which authorised him to allow the territorial troops to proceed westwards out of Dili to the border. The Australian troops' discipline had held, despite provocation, and an exchange of fire was averted.

The Australian platoon commander demonstrated that he had a sharp appreciation of his higher commander's intent, and although his rules of engagement authorised the use of lethal force against such provocation, he realised that the best approach was to seek to diffuse the situation. Major General Cosgrove observed that 'the decisions of junior leaders and the actions of their small teams can influence the course of international affairs'.²⁶

This was never more obvious than during the tense days after INTERFET's arrival and before the withdrawal of Indonesian troops from East Timor. There were several other similar displays of stealth, discipline, cunning and a clear appreciation of the strate-

gic consequences of tactical actions in the early days of the operation.

These consequences included several clashes between militia groups and INTERFET's Response Force and between militia and INTERFET light-infantry troops near the border with West Timor and to the east of Dili.²⁷

FALINTIL

One of the key groups that INTERFET sought to influence, or control, was the armed faction of the Timorese pro-independence national liberation front, FRETILIN. The faction was known as the 'Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor Leste', or FALINTIL. INTERFET developed a 'Three Ps' policy encouraging the 'Progressive Laying Down of Arms', facilitating 'Progressive Introduction' back into the civil structures, and encouraging 'Progressive Reconciliation'.

Recognising that they had to avoid giving the Indonesians and the militia a pretext to justify excluding an international force, FALINTIL exercised considerable discipline in the days before INTERFET's arrival when the militia groups had run amok. Response Force personnel carefully administered arrangements in order to convince FALINTIL to defer aspirations of playing a stronger role in security issues, effectively preventing them from adding to INTERFET's challenges. This approach also made it easier eventually to give FALINTIL a positive liaison role alongside peacekeeping troops assisting in border management, particularly once INTERFET had accomplished the initial tasks of providing a secure environment.

In the days and weeks that followed the initial deployment, INTERFET numbers increased and a secure environment was established in Dili as militia groups and Indonesian troops withdrew to Indonesia. This withdrawal and force increase allowed Commander INTERFET to deploy the

Brigade by sea, road and air to the border area adjacent to Indonesian West Timor.

Evans' force included the two infantry battalions and integral 3rd Brigade units as well as a company of British Gurkhas and the 1st Battalion of the Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (1RNZIR). The lead element of 1RNZIR arrived shortly after the main force had landed in Dili. The remainder of 1RNZIR, as well as a company of Canadian 'Vandoos' (R22eR) and a platoon of Irish Rangers, joined the lead New Zealander element in October.

Other national contingents deployed to the more benign sectors in central and eastern East Timor. By mid-October the manoeuvre phase of the operation had wound down, with forces allocated distinct areas of operation in which to establish security and facilitate humanitarian aid.

The force of public opinion

A major factor in promoting peace operations has been the force of public opinion. Because the maintenance of the collective will of INTERFET's member states was the operation's centre of gravity in East Timor, public relations was one of the most significant aspects of the operation to be managed as INTERFET evolved. The legitimacy of INTERFET as a peace enforcement mission was dependent on achieving a high degree of international consensus, and Commander INTERFET fully recognised this fact.

Legitimacy was demonstrated by the strong regional core membership in a truly cooperative international force.²⁸ As Alan Ryan has observed, 'those members of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) that were involved in INTERFET were particularly concerned that their participation not damage their relationship with Indonesia, ASEAN's largest member.'²⁹ Moreover, the Commander appreciated that international

²⁶ Peter Cosgrove, 'The night our boys stared down the barrel', *Age*, 21 June 2000, cited in Ryan, *Primary Risks and Primary Responsibilities*, p. 72.

²⁷ See Breen, *Mission Accomplished*, pp. 56-7 (Com incident), 63 (on the border), 77-8 (Motaain) and 87 (October incidents).

²⁸ Ryan, *Primary Risks and Primary Responsibilities*, pp. 55 and 66.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

satellite broadcast television and the Internet had increased his ability to influence the perceptions of key individuals and groups.³⁰

Consequently it was incumbent on him and his staff to ensure that a carefully managed and scrupulously honest media-awareness program was maintained to foster ongoing cooperation. Commander INTERFET's media conference in Darwin prior to the commencement of the operation

³⁰ Andrew Garfield, 'Information Operations as an Integrating Strategy', in Campen and Dearth, *Cyberwar 3.0*, p. 269; and correspondence with Lieutenant Colonel Chris Shine, 27 July 2001.

³¹ Breen, *Mission Accomplished*, p. 25.

demonstrated his understanding of this issue. He knew that he was going 'live' to Jakarta and Dili and those first impressions would be lasting. He also knew that his words and manner could either intensify or ease tensions.³¹

Role of the media

Consistent with this appreciation of the media's role, and to the chagrin of the infantry troops deploying to Dili on the first day of Operation *Stabilise*, 20 September, two C-130 aircraft loads of journalists were flown into Dili. The Australian Defence Force's Media Support Unit assigned to assist journalists accompanied them. The arrival of the journalists was scheduled at late notice, reflecting the ad-

hoc initial efforts at the strategic level to conduct the campaign with an Information Operations mindset.

Still, despite the initial resentment over the risks had the situation deteriorated, and the additional burden of protecting accredited journalists, many soon came to appreciate that the 'double edged sword' of media attention was working in favour of INTERFET. Media attention reinforced the mandate's legitimacy and further discredited the militias and their Indonesian sponsors. In the first few days before Headquarters INTERFET was fully established, and while 3rd Brigade was busy establishing a secure environment in Dili, the Brigade Commander's immediate



The New Force Commander of the UN Peacekeeping Force (PKF) in East Timor, Lieutenant General Winai Phattiyagul (L) from Thailand, speaks during a handover ceremony to replace Lieut. Gen. Boonsrangnumpradit (R) at the PKF headquarters in Dili, 31 August 2001. PKF has been in East Timor since the popular consultation in August 1999, under the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (Source::EPA/ANP)

action on the discovery of militia and Indonesian military burning or looting was to cue the media.³²

Critical to the plan for cueing the media was a confidence in the troops' discipline, high level of training, and understanding of the laws of armed conflict. The Australian Chief of the Defence Force, commenting on the degree of competency displayed by Australia's Army, Navy and Air Force during Operation *Stabilise*, observed that: we don't regard this as a one off – it is built into the system.³³

It was the calibre of the troops that gave the Commander the confidence to bring in the media on that first day. Australian troops have rules of engagement and orders for opening fire drilled into them, producing disciplined and alert soldiers. This kind of training proved instrumental in ensuring that the 'strategic corporal'³⁴ worked towards the common goal of INTERFET. Such discipline, combined with a clear and moral mandate, gave commanders confidence not to fear the media presence, but to work with it, wielding the double-edged sword advantageously.

Leaflets and radio broadcasts

In addition to media and legal concerns, a concerted psychological operations effort was undertaken by INTERFET. Conscious of the damaging effect of the backlash that misinformation could generate, the Psychological Operations Platoon was tasked with generating material that was scrupulously honest. The Platoon

Commander worked closely with the INTERFET Information Operations Cell as well as with the subordinate elements. This material included leaflets and loud-speaker broadcasts that were used in the early stages of the operation.

In such a low-technology environment, leaflets and broadcasts were essential and effective tools for disseminating messages to a range of audiences. Then, as the force was established, radio messages for a repaired radio station and a weekly newspaper were produced and well received by the locals and supporting aid organisations.

The newspaper was the main source of news for many people in the first few months since no other news media outlet had been left undamaged throughout East Timor as the Indonesians and the militias departed.

The radio program, which took longer to reach a wide audience, included what came to be known as the 'INTERFET Hour'. An appeal in Australia led many to donate spare radios for the people of East Timor. Over 300 radios, many of them large enough for use in a community hall, along with thousands of batteries, were shipped to East Timor and distributed.

In a low-technology environment such as the one in East Timor in late 1999, counterintelligence operations primarily meant field intelligence work – teams of humans collecting information, asking questions. These teams played an important role complementing the other available information collection capabilities to enhance situational awareness. They

also helped provide feedback on how successful the Information Operations efforts were being in influencing specific audience groups.

Infantry battalion commanders who had, at first, expressed reluctance to include such elements as part of their units changed their tune within the first few days of the operation, even requesting additional supplementation.

Today electronic warfare is widely considered to be a conventional component of any military force, and once it became clear that an operation was to be launched, resources were allocated and information became available. Once deployed, the coordination elements were retained in Dili but the Signals Squadron teams were deployed out with elements of the 3rd Brigade.³⁵

At battalion level, the lack of regularly working together on exercises meant that the Light Electronic Warfare Teams and the command elements were not conversant with battalion procedures, suggesting that more integrated training was required.³⁶

The contribution of coalition countries

Despite the concerted application of the various aspects of Information Operations, INTERFET would not have achieved its mission without the support of the contributing coalition countries. Consequently, a concerted effort was made by INTERFET and the higher Australian defence machinery to 'shape and influence' in order to quickly muster the necessary international support, particularly from key allies and regional partners.³⁷

These troops came with their own professional skills and heritage, complementing the force with their unique strengths that contributed to the successful outcome of the mission. Many nations also provided mil-

³² E-mail correspondence with author from Lieutenant Colonel Marcus Fielding (the S3 of Headquarters 3rd Brigade during Operation *Stabilise*), 22 July 2001.

³³ Interview with Admiral Chris Barrie, AO, RAN, Australian Defence headquarters, Canberra, 31 July 2000, cited in Ryan, *Primary Responsibilities and Primary Risks*, p.2.

³⁴ General C. C. Krulak, 'The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War',

Marines Magazine, January 1999.

³⁵ Blaxland, 'On Operations in East Timor', p. 9.

³⁶ Field, correspondence with author, 30 July 2001.

³⁷ Ground-forces capabilities were enhanced by contributions from Canada, New Zealand, Italy, Ireland, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Thailand, and the United Kingdom.

itary airlift assets – critical for the lodgement phase of the operation. It was no mean feat to enlist and then maintain the support from so many diverse countries with different cultures, languages and religions.

Shaping perceptions and influencing opinions was an important part of the equation. This achievement alone is a mark of the success of the INTERFET operation in countering external pressures aimed at undermining the INTERFET coalition.

Arguably one of the most important aspects of US support for INTERFET was the critical moral, political and financial pressure applied at the APEC Forum in New Zealand in early September that helped persuade Indonesia to accede to the international intervention.³⁸ The United States went on to provide civil affairs, intelligence and communications support to INTERFET, as well as unique heavy-lift and combat-support capabilities – capabilities in short supply in the Australian Defence Force.

The offshore presence of major components from a US Navy-Marine Amphibious Ready Group, with about 2500 Marines, was an additional important demonstration of US interest and resolve as well as of alliance solidarity. Their pressure also shaped perceptions and helped influence the opinions of key stakeholders, convincing wavering minds in the militia and among Indonesian local commanders not to confront INTERFET directly, particularly in the vulnerable first few days of the deployment.

United Nations taking over

INTERFET had been created partly to help the United Nations Assistance Mission East Timor (UNAMET), which had supervised the fateful ballot on 30 August 1999. Once INTERFET had completed its essential tasks, particu-

larly establishing a secure environment, the Australian Government – keen to minimise costs and restore relations with Indonesia – was eager to shift responsibility for East Timor back to the United Nations.

The United Nations resolved to establish a Transitional Authority for East Timor (UNTAET) to supervise the transition to full independence. While the fate of UNTAET is not the topic of this article, it is encouraging to note that, despite the usual challenges associated with UN mandates, UNTAET has successfully managed to assist the East Timorese progress towards independence by providing a relatively peaceful environment.

As Commander of INTERFET, Major General Cosgrove understood that his mission was finite in scope and time. Once his mission was successfully completed, he set about ensuring that the United Nations was best placed to take over as soon as possible, and INTERFET handed over to UNTAET on 23 February 2000.

INTERFET's broader application

Although the threat environment in East Timor did not feature adversaries as heavily armed and equipped as those in the Balkans and other recent international military operations, the evidence suggests that the INTERFET mission could have been less successful and far more turbulent in character. Instrumental in its success and the avoidance of significant clashes was the clear understanding demonstrated by the troops of the higher commander's intent for the mission.

Showing restraint throughout the operation, the INTERFET troops and their commanders appreciated the need to limit the collateral political effects that an escalation of violence would have generated, particularly with the rapid dissemination of news made possible by the ever-present mass media.

The adaptation of established practices and procedures to meet emergent circumstances resulted in a classic example of manoeuvre tailored for the information era, and featuring applied and controlled Information Operations. The manoeuvrist approach that was prevalent in East Timor would assist in the development of Australian Defence Force doctrine for Information Operations.

Focused Information Operations efforts, incorporating fused and timely intelligence, allowed for careful and efficient vectoring of combat forces to hot spots in the early days that effectively unhinged the adversary in Dili, along the border with Indonesian West Timor, and throughout the remainder of East Timor. The coordinated application of stealthy and highly mobile Response Force assets – along with the light infantry, armour and air elements – quickly put the adversary off balance and gave INTERFET the clear psychological advantage. This was the case even while INTERFET was still outnumbered by the militia and Indonesian troops, which – at the lower levels and among territorial units at least – were prepared only grudgingly to accept INTERFET's mandate.

Perception management

Operation *Stabilise* also demonstrates the significance of a shift from reliance on kinetic (or blast) effects to an emphasis on perception management as a key tool to accomplish a mission. With this approach, carefully crafted and timed actions, demonstrations and announcements were targeted at specific audiences as part of the efforts aimed at 'shaping and influencing' – that is, pressuring them to bend to the will of INTERFET.

Such actions were only credible because they were backed up by highly trained, mobile and well-equipped forces on the ground that were in turn supported by the maritime forces and air elements. Overall, the mission succeeded because tactics and television coverage carried the day.³⁹

³⁸ *East Timor in Transition*, p. 137.

³⁹ Fielding, correspondence with author, 22 July 2001.

Perception management did not replace the potent threat represented by the promise of force; and it is not the intention of this article to denigrate the place of blast effects. Kinetic or blast effects are important and they remained important for INTERFET as well. The point is the degree to which we emphasise one over the other, not whether we emphasise one at the total expense of the other.

They are not mutually exclusive. Yet commanders historically have paid little more than lip service to 'shaping and influencing' the 'battle-space' in non-kinetic ways. INTERFET demonstrated that this need not be the case.

The Australian commanders involved in launching Operation *Stabilise* demonstrated their understanding that an obsession with kinetic effects – blowing things up – can have long-term, detrimental effects on national and international interests. Adherents of a Clausewitzian approach would echo his call to 'let us hear no more about generals who conquer without bloodshed'. Yet, in conventional wars of the future, such concerns should perhaps be relegated to second place.

As recent events have demonstrated, convention in armed conflict is becoming increasingly difficult to define. In multinational operations, however, where a fragile coalition plays a pivotal role, relegating such concerns can have long-term, drastic and damaging ramifications. Furthermore, in the case of Operation

Stabilise, the effective display of military prowess in a measured, constrained and focused way laid the solid foundations for the nation building that is still occurring in East Timor today.

The disciplined and careful application of force limited the collateral political damage to Australia's relations with regional neighbours, and particularly helped contain any political damage in relations with Indonesia. For instance, had less-disciplined troops not understood the intent of the mission in the tense first few days, unintended confrontations could have resulted in a far more difficult situation, further damaging Australia's relations with Indonesia and threatening to unravel the coalition that was so critical to INTERFET's legitimacy.

New notions of warfare

In the wake of the attacks of September 2001 and the US-led war on terrorism, strategists are re-examining old notions of warfare. The traditional focus on conventional high-intensity operations is in the process of shifting to address asymmetric threats and to influence the course of non-state-based conflicts. This new thinking stresses the use of public diplomacy, public affairs, and psychological warfare to achieve objectives while containing the 'collateral damage'.⁴⁰ The East Timor operation joins a long list of low-intensity military opera-

tions that have increasingly become the focus of military forces worldwide, but its innovative handling of information sets it apart from many previous military coalitions.

Military theorists have argued and experience has shown that in contemporary land operations there may be no fronts, since fighting may occur almost anywhere in the theatre as the modal size of operational units becomes quite small – even well below the size of the typical 700-man battalion. In this context, information, in all its dimensions, can greatly enhance the capabilities of small units.⁴¹ The emergent nature of conflict, as reflected in recent events, has echoes in the East Timor operation.

East Timor is predominantly rural, and in September 1999, it was a largely desolate and devastated land. Yet despite the predominantly rural setting, Operation *Stabilise* featured operations in urban areas. INTERFET troops exercised remarkable restraint, resulting in very few casualties and a speedy elimination of the threat from armed militia members wherever INTERFET troops deployed.

Given the likelihood that future operations will include urban areas – where combat has historically been very costly in terms of casualties – the East Timor example merits attention. The troops' self-discipline, restraint under provocation, and focus on the higher commander's intent proved a noteworthy feature.

Arguably, the approach taken by the Commander of INTERFET demonstrates a less manpower-intensive and a more media-savvy alternative to high-casualty urban operations that is more suitable for a country such as Australia, which has a challenging strategic environment and which, like Canada, is constrained by limited resources.⁴²

The most obvious reason for examining the East Timor operation is that it contrasts markedly with widely criti-

⁴⁰ Richard Holbrooke, 'Get the Message Out', *Washington Post*, 28 October 2001, p. B07.

⁴¹ John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, 'A New Epoch – and Spectrum – of Conflict', in John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (eds), *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age*, RAND Corporation, National Defense Research Institute, Washington, D.C., 1997, chap. 1, p. 2.

⁴² See Brigadier M. A. Swan, Director General Future Land Warfare – Army, *Land Warfare Conference 2000*, Melbourne, 2000, pp. 2-8.

⁴³ In Somalia, arguably only UNOSOM II 'failed', UNOSOM I (Humanitarian) and UNITAF having been relatively successful, but

the overall outcome of the combined missions was not successful. The initial deployment to Haiti proceeded well, but today Haiti's problems reflect fundamental flaws in the original mission objectives. In the Balkans, UNPROFOR was a failure and even IFOR/SFOR have met with what at best is described as limited success. The Kosovo air campaign could also be described as less than successful and KFOR faces vast challenges. See Gary T. Dempsey with Roger W. Fontaine, *Fool's Errands – America's Recent Encounters with Nation Building*, CATO Institute, Washington D.C., 2001.

cised recent MOOTW elsewhere, including Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo.⁴³ Firstly, the East Timor crisis presented a more compelling challenge to Australia, the main force contributor, than had previous international missions in Africa, Asia and Europe.

It also provided an opportunity for atonement over a sense among Australians of past neglect.⁴⁴ Australia's commitment of troops to East Timor helped ensure crucial popular support in Australia and elsewhere for the commitment of military forces. This sense of compulsion was arguably less evident for the Balkans.

Support

The move to commit Australian troops was critical to enlist the support of ASEAN and other partners. Without Australia taking the lead, the others would not have participated. In turn, the wide support for Australia's lead role generated greater home-based enthusiasm for the operation. The spirit in which the troops approached their task to give the East Timorese 'a fair go' reinforced this popular support.⁴⁵

Of equal if not greater significance to the outcome of Operation *Stabilise* was the robust wording of the mandate, explicitly authorising the use of

lethal force, the specific and achievable tasks assigned, and the focused approach taken in executing them, where the end state was always in mind.

Studies also point to the strong and unified command-and-control arrangements as being pivotal in such operations. As Alan Ryan has observed,

*The Australian role as the dominant lead-nation flew in the face of the experience of most peace operations. UN and multilateral peace-keeping missions generally follow a more bureaucratic and collegiate model of command, where national representation often has priority over operational effectiveness. This mode of command has proven to be the 'Achilles heel' of high-intensity coalition peace operations time and again.*⁴⁶

In contrast, strong central command in East Timor allowed effective and comprehensive responses to issues as they arose, and in a timely manner that was suitable for the media and appropriate for specific audiences.

The INTERFET operation also has broader significance as an operation not led by the United States or the European Union, demonstrating how a small to medium-sized power like Australia or Canada can play a leading role among forces from many contributing nations.⁴⁷

East Timor and the Balkans share a few common circumstances. Like the Balkans, the East Timor situation was tragic, involving many deaths. Bosnia, like Timor is also a clear example of a failed state that called for external intervention. Timor also faces transition challenges now that the United Nations has handed over to the Timorese. At some stage, greater efforts will have to be made in Bosnia as well as Kosovo for self-govern-

ment and self-reliance if not total independence.⁴⁸

Apart from these commonalities, there are several unique circumstances that pertain to East Timor. First of all, East Timor experienced a confluence of fortunate circumstances that are not found in Bosnia or Kosovo. East Timor also has benefited from the rhetoric of reconciliation and from a higher quality of domestic political leadership; but Timor's land mass and population are small, presenting peacekeepers with a more manageable challenge than their contemporaries in Bosnia and Kosovo. Timor is also very poor with little prospect of independent wealth until at least 2005 when the Timor Sea oil and gas fields are expected to become productive.⁴⁹

Minimal violence

Perhaps this operation also serves to demonstrate what some have already argued: that Sun Tzu's notion of victory with minimal violence may displace Clausewitz's emphasis on the deadly clash of armies amid fog and friction.⁵⁰ Regardless, Operation *Stabilise* was no fool's errand. It was an operation launched with a sense of regret over the events of early September, but also with measured determination.

This combination ensured that INTERFET was an unqualified military success, and those nations that contributed to it can be justifiably proud of their enduring legacy.

Moreover, students of military operations can refer to it as a 'by the book' example of applied military force for limited strategic aims in a coalition environment – an appropriate way to use military forces as an extension of national and international policy. Operation *Stabilise* also demonstrates the measured application of force with a manoeuvrist mind-set in what is arguably the most likely form of military conflict in the current era – asymmetric, low-intensity and urban operations.

⁴⁴ At great personal expense, many East Timorese had assisted Australian Commandos to fight Japanese troops in East Timor from 1942 to 1943. Many Australians have long felt obligated to them for that assistance and have been ashamed over Australia's unilateral recognition of Indonesia's 1975 annexation of East Timor.

⁴⁵ Breen, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

⁴⁶ Alan Ryan, *Primary Responsibilities and Primary Risks*, LWSC Study Paper 304, p. 83.

⁴⁷ Twenty-two nations contributed forces to INTERFET. INTERFET's peak strength was 11,500 personnel of whom 5500 were Australians. Breen, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ Presentation in Montreal by Dr Mark Baskin, Research Director, Pearson Peacekeeping Centre, 16 May 2002.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Arquilla and Ronfeldt, *In Athena's Camp*, p. 18.