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The security outlook: a Timor-Leste perspective

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Damien Kingsbury works closely with the government of Timor-Leste. This perspective on the strategic outlook for Timor-Leste and the region reflects the views of the Timor-Leste government.

Key words: strategic outlook; Timor-Leste.

Timor-Leste is a country born of a keen awareness of its security needs and aspirations. In the period of transition from Portuguese rule, the country and its people descended into a brief but bloody civil war, then almost immediately faced incursions from across the western border. Its people underwent 24 devastating years of occupation and resistance, emerging to confront a new security threat – that of a country largely destroyed. Timor-Leste has built since then, but again faced an internal security crisis as some citizens and institutions of state, still unready for full self-responsibility, took Timor-Leste back to the edge. It has since come out of that process having learned and grown.

Internal Stability

Timor-Leste now has two security foci. The first and most pressing focus for Timor-Leste is to ensure that the new state remains internally calm and politically stable. This means that administrative processes are undertaken by a non-partisan public service on behalf of the government, with formal debate and discussion about policy conducted within the parliament. It further means that while there may be differences of opinion about policies and practices beyond the parliament, such as by political parties and civil society groups, these are expressed in a lawful and socially constructive manner.

As a state, Timor-Leste has invested in its democratic processes, the activity of its civil society groups and its embrace of political and social pluralism. It is rapidly learning the value of such political openness and participation as the regulated environment for the contest of ideas.

Economic and social development

To help ensure that debate and discussion are conducted in a calm and lawful manner, the state is working to reduce the conditions that may contribute to social tensions, through continuing to develop and create employment and to improve livelihoods. Timor-Leste recognises that lower standards of living have a direct relationship to the propensity towards state fragility and is actively working to improve the lives of its citizens.

This then goes to the government's *Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030* (RDTL 2011), unveiled after extensive consultation with stakeholders and communities

across Timor-Leste. The Strategic Development Plan provides a road map for the state and its people over the next two decades, identifying and charting ways forward across all economic and social sectors. At its heart is taking Timor-Leste from being among the world's poorest countries, in terms of living standards if less so per capita GDP, to bring it to middle income status both as a statistical outcome but, more importantly, as reflected in the lives of its citizens.

While Timor-Leste remains a society that is dependent on agriculture for livelihoods, it does need and intends to transition to other forms of wealth and employment creation, including industrial development and an improved tourism sector. In particular, Timor-Leste is well positioned to take advantage of its oil and gas natural resources to help establish a petro-chemical industry. The first stage in such an industry will require working with partners to assist in skills and technology transfers, eventually allowing Timor-Leste to become self-sufficient in running such projects.

The establishment of Timor-Leste's petro-chemical industry is the focus of the Tasi Mane development project on the country's south coast, where it is intended such an industry be established. Plans for the Tasi Mane project have been drawn up and are embedded in the Strategic Development Plan (RDTL 2011:138-140). Timor-Leste continues to seek cooperative partnerships with a view to establishing this petro-chemical industry.

Languages

For any country to reach its economic potential and to bond as a nation, it must have a single literate language. Timor-Leste is a country blessed with great linguistic diversity, with 19 distinct languages and 16 further dialects. This endows the country with a particular cultural richness. The government is committed to recognising and protecting these 'mother tongues' as a central part of the country's cultural heritage and, more recently, as a mechanism for introducing beginning students to public education.

Timor-Leste also has two official languages – Portuguese and Tetum. Portuguese is a functionally useful and a culturally important language of law and administration and Timor-Leste is fortunate to be able to share this linguistic history with the rest of the international community of Lusophone states. Meanwhile, Tetum, spoken by over 80 per cent of the population, continues to develop as a literate language, with an increasing number of texts

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being available in what is now a standardised language (RDTL 2011:18).

Decentralisation programme

One of Timor-Leste's immediate challenges is to ensure that the development and economic growth that the country has been experiencing since 2007 is equitably shared. To this end, the government has engaged in a major decentralisation programme, to spread the benefits of development beyond Dili (RDTL 2011:112-113). This programme will focus on the allocation and provision of government services, including health and infrastructure, at the local level, thereby helping ensure that services meet local needs and further the use of local companies and labour to undertake those projects. The spread of financial liquidity through this process will help generate economic activity in the local formal economic sector, building the wealth of local communities and helping to pull them out of the poverty that continues to mire the lives of so many.

Corruption and justice

Most countries experience elements of corruption and developing countries are more prone than most as they seek to grow quickly within a context of sometimes fragile institutions and weak understandings of appropriate behaviour, of transferring from previously acceptable patron-client relationships to higher levels of integrity, accountability and transparency. Failure to eradicate corruption leads to economic slow-down and social unrest, both of which no country can afford. To this end, Timor-Leste has launched a very public campaign to eradicate corruption and has established a high level and very active anti-corruption commission (CAC 2012). The anti-corruption efforts must be done and they must be seen to be done.

Related to this, Timor-Leste is continuing to develop its judicial system, to increase the access of all Timorese to formal legal processes.

Police and army

Timor-Leste has had to build a police force (PNTL) from the remnants of the Indonesian police system and an army (F-FDTL) from its Falintil guerrilla base. Assistance from the international community has been invaluable in achieving these goals and bilateral arrangements, such as the Defence Cooperation Programme with Australia, continue to be central to the F-FDTL's continued development. Timor-Leste continues to reform and professionalise its security sector and intends for its military to soon be able to participate in international peacekeeping operations as a responsible member of the international community.

Petroleum fund

Critically, Timor-Leste's economic development has, to date, been built on access to its Petroleum Fund, which is based on royalties received from the development and exploitation of its resources in the Timor Sea (see La'õ Hamutuk 2012). While Timor-Leste intends to diversify away from reliance on the Petroleum Fund, it remains a crucial underpinning for economic development now and into the future. To that end, the fund is being used sustainably while also allowing spending on critical infrastructure development projects, such as roads, ports and airports. It has already helped build the country's national electricity grid, which is approaching the final stages of its roll-out.

Regional Security

Timor-Leste's second focus is to ensure that the country and its people find security with its regional neighbours – not from them – and increasingly participates as a good international citizen. Geo-strategically, Timor-Leste sits at the cross-roads of Asia, Australia and the Pacific and its history and culture reflect these influences. Timor-Leste also enjoys good relations with the states of the South-West Pacific and continues to participate in dialogues with them. However, in terms of its primary external orientation and identification, Timor-Leste sees itself firmly within Asia and as an Asian state.

Southeast Asia

To that end, Timor-Leste's priority in its international relationships is to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and to participate as a full, 11th member. Over the next six months, the prime minister intends to visit every ASEAN nation. Timor-Leste sees ASEAN strengthening its role as a mediator in wider regional issues and as a guarantor of peace in its own environment. As a future member state, Timor-Leste wishes to contribute to and enhance that wider mediation role and to guarantee peace in its own environment.

Indonesia

While Timor-Leste has good friendships in the Pacific, which it intends to maintain, closer engagement holds the key to its strategic future. Not least, and despite their troubled past, Timor-Leste now enjoys warm and close relations with its immediate neighbour, Indonesia. Timor-Leste and Indonesia share a border across the middle of the island of Timor and around the enclave of Oecussi in West Timor. Timor-Leste and Indonesia are still negotiating the final details of the Oecussi border, where traditional land use, family ties and languages had previously been unrestricted. While Timor-Leste encourages continued links across the border, recognition of formal borders is critical in ensuring that there are no misunderstandings about who belongs where and, as a consequence, the potential for localised conflict is avoided.

Timor-Leste's main border with Indonesia, between Mota'ain in the north and Salele in the south, traverses the sparsely populated middle of the island's east-west mountain range. From the Timor-Leste side, this border is protected by the Border Patrol Unit (UPF), a special branch of the PNTL. Particularly at Mota'ain and Salele, Timor-Leste and Indonesian border officials enjoy very good, friendly relations, indicating that the tensions that once characterised the region have long since evaporated.

More officially, Timor-Leste is enjoying increasingly strong relations with Indonesia across a range of fields. The political and diplomatic relationship is strong and close, with numerous and well received visits by government leaders in both directions. Bilateral cooperation is also increasing, with PNTL officers training in Indonesia and F-FDTL members preparing to participate in joint activities. These are major steps in the substantial strengthening and deepening of Timor-Leste's bilateral relationship with its large neighbour.

The positive relationship between Timor-Leste and Indonesia has in particular been built up, from Indonesia's side, under the leadership of Indonesia's President Susilo

Bambang Yudhoyono, who concludes his second term, his final available term in office, in 2014. As a result, the outcome of Indonesia's 2014 elections is expected to continue to influence and perhaps shape Timor-Leste-Indonesia relations into the medium to longer term.

China

Further afield, Timor-Leste enjoys strong and developing relations with China, which is increasingly the economic powerhouse of Asia. China has invested in its good relationship with Timor-Leste, not least by helping Timor-Leste build infrastructure critical to its institutional capacity, including the foreign affairs building, the presidential palace and the F-FDTL headquarters (Beja 2012). China has also assisted strategically, with the supply of two patrol boats which assist with the securing of Timor-Leste's waters from poaching, and uniforms to its army. China has acted as a good regional neighbour towards Timor-Leste and, as China increases its economic and strategic reach, it is important for Timor-Leste to maintain and further develop positive bilateral relations.

Towards a tripartite security treaty

As already mentioned, Timor-Leste also enjoys a strong Defence Cooperation Programme with Australia and would like to see that cooperation extended to include a formal defence treaty between the two countries. Such a treaty would recognise the mutual sphere of geographic interest shared by Australia and Timor-Leste and would enhance Australia's overarching policy of further engaging with Asia, of which Timor-Leste is a part.

Within such a treaty arrangement, there is further scope for including Indonesia in a tripartite arrangement with Timor-Leste and Australia, which would help cement continuing close relations between the three neighbours. Australia has continued to enhance its security cooperation with Indonesia, as has Timor-Leste. While the three states are very different in geography, population and stages of development, they do share a common concern with regional peace, security and stability, and a joint approach to resolving regional issues.

Timor-Leste would welcome discussion with Australia and Indonesia about the possibility of such mutually beneficial arrangements, reflecting the common interests that geography has bestowed upon us.

Timor-Leste does not foresee a need for its international friends to again send troops and police to assist with the restoration of order. Its government and people firmly believe those growing pains are now behind it. But it does recognise and appreciate their contributions to Timor-Leste's peace and stability at a crucial time. To that end, Timor-Leste wishes to retain positive and mutually beneficial relations with those states, both in its immediate region and more globally, and will work towards doing so.

The Lusophone states

In this respect, beyond the immediate region, Timor-Leste retains warm relations with Portugal, Brazil and other Lusophone states. In particular, Portugal has assisted in Timor-Leste's internal security, through its provision of its paramilitary Republican National Guard (GNR), and it also continues to assist with language programmes.

Global affairs

Timor-Leste intends, as a fully functioning and responsible member of the international community, to increasingly participate in global affairs. As already noted, it hopes to be able to send peacekeepers to participate in United Nations missions, as it has firsthand experience of the benefits that can arise from such mandated missions. Further, as shown by its experiences with international lobbying, negotiating, its active participation in regional forums, and, more recently, leading the formation of the g7+ group of underdeveloped countries, Timor-Leste is both willing and able to make a real contribution to the affairs of the global community.

Conclusion

Timor-Leste sees its internal security challenges increasingly easing as it continues to grow and develop. There is a strong awareness that in order to secure future peace and stability, the needs of its people must be met, and it is the responsibility of their elected government to do that in as organised and efficient a manner as possible. But it recognises that there will still be bumps along the way, as there are in the life of any state and in particular developing states. Not everyone in Timor-Leste agrees on the way forward and not every plan can take into account every unforeseen possibility. But its government believes that such 'bumps' will be small relative to its past and that they will be nothing that Timor-Leste can now not address through its own institutions, including its security forces.

Internationally, Timor-Leste sees its future security with, rather than from, its neighbours. Timor-Leste is fortunate in having good relations with its regional neighbours and with countries further afield. Timor-Leste is a small country, with a small land mass and relatively few people. But, as a state in the international community of states, it intends to be a full, active and responsible global citizen, working with its friends and others to help achieve international peace and harmony which it so dearly values.

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