

***Strategic Partnership between Australia and Thailand:  
A Case Study of East Timor***

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**Abstract**

This paper uses the concept of strategic partnership to analyse the co-operation between Australia and Thailand in the peacekeeping operations in East Timor from 1999 to 2001. A strategic partnership in this paper does not focus on formal agreements between countries or exchange of visits between officials. Instead, a strategic partnership in this paper focuses on how to countries work together by sharing skills, information, resources and risks to advance their perceived mutual interests. This paper argues that before 1999, Australia and Thailand had shared the same stance on the incorporation of East Timor by Indonesia as both countries supported Indonesia's action. After the East Timorese people voted for independence in the referendum conducted by the United Nations in 1999 and violence erupted, Australia and Thailand worked together in East Timor as strategic partners to restore peace and stability in the territory. Thailand's contributions helped legitimise Australia's leading roles in East Timor because Thailand represented a substantial ASEAN component in the Australia-led International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) as Thailand provided the second largest number of troops and the Deputy Commander. Operationally, while Australia was mainly responsible for disarming militias in the western part of East Timor along the border with West Timor, Thailand's military officers demonstrated at least three skills which complemented the roles of Australian troops, namely: (1) the ability to get along with local people; (2) agricultural development; and (3) understanding of the way of life of the East Timorese.

Keywords: strategic partnership, peacekeeping operations, Australia, Thailand, East Timor

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## **Introduction**

Prime Minister John Howard of Australia (2011 p. 336) identified in his autobiography that the liberation of East Timor from Indonesia in 1999 was one of the achievements during his prime ministership of which he was most proud. In 1999, Australia under his government led a multinational force, International Force for East Timor (INTERFET), authorised by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), to restore peace and stability in East Timor and to pave the way for and facilitate the transition to East Timor's independence. Chalk (2001, p. 1) observed that it was Australia's most significant military operation in an external territory since the Vietnam War.

The operations in East Timor provided an opportunity for Australia and Thailand to work together as strategic partners at both political and operational levels. Thailand led by Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai supported Australian leading roles by providing the second largest number of troops and the deputy commander of the INTERFET, Major General Songkitti Jaggabatara (retired as General and the Supreme Commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces). After INTERFET, Australia and Thailand worked together in the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET). Major-General Michael Smith and Major-General Roger Powell of Australia became the deputy commanders of UNTAET under the command of Lieutenant-General Boonsang Niumpradit of Thailand (retired as General and the Supreme Commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces).

This paper uses the concept of strategic partnership to analyse the co-operation between Australia and Thailand in the peacekeeping operations in East Timor from 1999 to 2001. This article argues after the East Timorese people voted for independence in the referendum conducted by the United Nations in 1999 and violence erupted, Australia and Thailand worked together and complemented each other as strategic partners to restore peace and stability in the territory. Thailand's contributions legitimised Australia's leading roles in East Timor. Operationally, while Australia was mainly responsible for fighting against and disarming militias in the western part of East Timor along the border with West Timor, which is part of Indonesia, Thailand's military officers demonstrated at least three skills which complemented the roles of Australian troops, namely: (1) the ability to get along with local people; (2) agricultural development; and (3) understanding of the way of life and the mentality of the East Timorese.

## **Strategic partnership**

'Strategic partnership' is one of the vaguest terms in international relations. Some scholars, for example, Grevi (2010, p. 2), in the context of the European Union (EU), contended that "Strategic partnerships are a political category that no EU document or statement clearly defines." However, Wilkins (2008, p. 359) suggested that the term strategic partnership has been widely proliferated and embraced. Moreover, the document on the website the Council of the European Union (2003, p. 14) entitled 'A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy', suggested that Europe "should look to develop strategic partnerships, with Japan, China, Canada and India as well as with all those who share our goals and values, and are prepared to act in their support" (Council of the European Union, 2003, p. 14).

According to Nadkarni (2010 pp. 48-49), there are some common elements of strategic partnerships which can be summarised as follows: (1) formalised written agreements; (2) multi-level institutional links; (3) meetings at various levels - from the level of bureaucratic officials to the summit meetings between leaders; (4) military ties development; (5) attempts at stronger economic relationship; and (6) promotion each other's cultures through activities.

One of the limitations of Nadkarni's approach is that, as a written agreement is one of the main elements of a strategic partnership, so the relationships between other states are completely excluded from the analysis no matter how closely they work together and how intense their relationships are.

On the other hand, Wilkins (2008, p. 363; 2011, p. 123) did not refer to a written agreement as one of the features of a strategic partnership when he recast the business definition of a strategic partnership and defined the term in the context of international relations as "structured collaboration between states (or other actors) to take joint advantage of economic opportunities, or to respond to security challenges more effectively than could be achieved in isolation. Strategic partnering occurs both in and between the international and domestic sectors (levels). Besides allowing information, skills, and resources to be shared, a strategic partnership also permits the partners to share risk."

However, when Wilkins picked up the cases for analysis, the same problems arise. Most of the case studies selected are not different from Nadkarni's. The strategic partnerships between Russia and China, Russia and India, Japan and Australia as well as Japan and India (Wilkins, 2008, pp. 363-376; 2011, pp. 127-145) have some forms of written strategic partnership agreements.

While Goldstein's definition shares some elements of a strategic partnership with Nadkarni's, a formal written agreement was excluded from the definition. Apart from focusing on how the parties to a strategic partnership work together on matters of shared concerns, Goldstein also highlighted the significance of official visits, meetings and summits between government officials and leaders of the parties when he defined a strategic partnership as, "The essential elements are a commitment to promoting stable relationship and extensive economic intercourse, muting disagreements about domestic politics in the interest of working together on matters of shared concern in international diplomacy, and routinizing the frequent exchange of official visits, especially those by representatives of each country's military and regular summit meetings between top government leaders" (Goldstein, 2003, p. 75).

This approach pays attention mostly to formal mechanisms such as summit meetings between leaders, official visits or ministerial meetings of the parties to a strategic partnership. Accordingly, when analysing strategic partnerships between states, this approach tends to present meticulous details of numerous meetings and visits at different levels between those states as well as the outcome documents. Therefore, this approach can only explain strategic partnerships generally, but it does not highlight any significant cases in which the two states work closely together as strategic partners and examine them profoundly.

When Jiraporn Jiranthakij defined the term strategic partnership in the context of the relationship between China and the United States under the Clinton administration (1993-2001), her definition is similar to Goldstein's as she did not refer to a formal written agreement as a prerequisite for a strategic partnership, but she defined the term in a more flexible way by also focusing on a co-operative relationship, not official visits and summits. According to Jiraporn Jiranthakij (2003 p. 72), a strategic partnership is "a co-operative relationship which encompasses co-operation on a wide range of issues for long-term mutual benefits of the two countries and the world."

When defining a strategic partnership, there are at least two different stances on the areas of co-operation in a strategic partnership. The first group of scholars suggest that a strategic partnership should span numerous areas of co-operation. Grevi (2010, p. 8) stressed that a strategic partnership is a comprehensive relationship. Some other scholars propose that a strategic partnership concentrates more on security and economic issues even though they recognise that there could be some other areas of co-operation. For example, Tolipov (2006, p. 3) highlighted security interests as the most important sphere of co-operation in a strategic partnership. It should be noted that among the two groups of scholars, there is a consensus that security and economic issues are the main two spheres of co-operation of a strategic partnership.

Overall, the definition of a strategic partnership between Australia and Thailand in this research is a co-operative relationship between two states to work closely together in the spheres of security and economics in order to advance their perceived self-interests. However, this paper focuses only on the sphere of security with the co-operation between Australia and Thailand in East Timor as the case study.

### **Historical background**

The Timor Island is the easternmost and the biggest island of the Lesser Sunda Islands (Boxer, 1960, p. 349) in the Indonesia Archipelago. East Timor is a small territory in the eastern part of the island approximately 18,900 square kilometres in area and approximately 265 kilometres long and 92 kilometres wide including the enclave of Oecussi in West Timor (Smith & Dee, 2003, p. 33). It shares a border with West Timor, which Indonesia inherited from the Netherlands as part of decolonisation after the Second World War. Culturally, it should be noted that East Timor is different from other islands and areas of Indonesia because it has not been influenced by Islam like other parts of Indonesia. This may to some extent explained the difficulties Indonesia faced when it tried to integrate the territory.

The Portuguese colonial administration was set up in Dili, the capital city of East Timor, in 1769. Portuguese control over East Timor was relatively benign compared with the Dutch rule in the western part of East Timor (Macdougall, 2012, p. 325).

East Timor is of great significance to Australia's security as any great powers which intend to invade Australia must come through the Indonesian Archipelago, of which East Timor is a part. This is one of the reasons Australian soldiers invaded East Timor during the Second World War to prevent the Japanese invasion (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, p. 111). Later, Japan invaded East Timor with the aim of expelling

Australian troops from the territory, resulting in the loss of lives of tens of thousands of East Timorese people (Frei, 1996, p. 281).

After the Second World War, the western part of Timor became a part of the new Republic of Indonesia. After Indonesia became independent in 1949, President Sukarno did not pay attention to the territory of East Timor. Portugal then returned to become the colonial master of East Timor.

The situation in East Timor changed because of two major political developments. First, the anti-communist regime led by President Suharto assumed power in Indonesia in the late 1960s after the coup d'état against President Sukarno. The regime was supported by the United States and its allies including Australia. Even though Indonesia tried to retain its image as a country which supported independence of colonial territories, the reality was the polar opposite. Second, in 1974, there was a coup d'état in Portugal by the Movement of the Armed Forces comprising lower-ranked left-wing military officers. The coup d'état toppled an authoritarian regime and committed Portugal to decolonisation in Africa and Asia including East Timor.

Indonesia's intention to invade East Timor was tacitly supported by Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other member countries of ASEAN. Whitlam notified President Suharto of Indonesia on 6 September 1974 during his visit to Indonesia that "East Timor should become part of Indonesia" ("Record of Meeting between Whitlam and Soeharto 1974," 2000 p. 95). He also believed that "Portuguese Timor was too small to be independent. It was economically unviable. Independence would be unwelcome to Indonesia, to Australia and to other countries in the region..." ("Record of Meeting between Whitlam and Soeharto 1974," 2000 pp. 95-96). Indonesia invaded East Timor on 7 December 1975. However, Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor was never recognised by the international community, but Australia and Thailand supported it. In Australia both Labor and Coalition governments considered Australia's strong relationship with Indonesia as their priority over the right to self-determination of the East Timorese. Moreover, they were doubtful that their support for the independence of East Timor could make any differences to the situation in East Timor (White, 2008, p. 70).

Thailand's policy towards East Timor before the intervention in 1999 can be understood within the framework of ASEAN, the international organisation of Southeast Asian states of which Indonesia and Thailand are both members, and the communist expansion in Southeast Asia in the 1970s. Since ASEAN was established by the Bangkok Declaration in 1967, ASEAN member countries including Thailand have always adhered to the principle of non-interference. ASEAN member states including Thailand considered the issue of East Timor as internal affairs of Indonesia which led to their common stance that East Timor was part of Indonesia.

Moreover, ASEAN member states including Thailand in particular, shared the same fear with Indonesia that East Timor would have been fallen under communism if it had not been annexed by Indonesia. In an interview with Jones, Tej Bunnag (Jones, 2012 p. 67) asserted that ASEAN anti-communist elites "shared a general feeling that FRETILIN was a communist front." Bunnag (Jones, 2012 p. 71) also insisted that Indonesia did the right thing in order to eliminate the communist threat that it perceived.

As the issue of East Timor was off the Security Council's agenda due to Western powers' lack of intention to oppose Indonesia, ASEAN member countries worked together in the United Nations to prevent the discussion of the issue in the Decolonisation Committee (Jones, 2012 p. 71) ASEAN's efforts succeeded in 1982 when the issue was essentially erased from the international agenda (Jones, 2012 p. 72).

Both Australia and Thailand supported Indonesia's occupation of East Timor based on their strategic interests during the Cold War. Australia and Thailand tried to prevent the issue from being discussed and debated in the international organisations.

### **The Roles of Australia and Thailand in the Intervention in East Timor**

The dynamics of the issue of East Timor changed substantially when Indonesia was severely affected by the Asian financial crisis, especially after the depreciation of the Thai currency. The stability of Suharto's regime was substantially undermined when university students mobilised protests Suharto in major cities across the country. He was forced to resign on 21 May 1998 and was replaced by Vice-President, Dr Bucharuddin Jusuf Habibie.

As Prime Minister Howard (2011 p. 340) observed, President Habibie regarded East Timor as a liability, not an asset for Indonesia. Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer saw this change as an opportunity to resolve the East Timor issue, to improve the relationship between Australia and Indonesia by assisting Indonesia to remove what Indonesia Foreign Minister Ali Alatas called "pebble in the shoe" (Kelly, 2010, p. 485).

After the federal election in 1998, Downer became more active in pursuing a new policy towards East Timor. DFAT recommended Prime Minister Howard to send a letter to President Habibie to propose Australia's proposals on East Timor. In the letter dated 19 December 1998 from to Habibie, Howard (1998) insisted that he supported East Timor to remain part of Indonesia. However, the most significant part of the letter was the recommendations to postpone the decision on the status of East Timor and to incorporate a review mechanism into the autonomy package provided for the East Timorese.

On 27 January 1999, Habibie announced that East Timorese people would be offered a clear choice between limited autonomy within Indonesia or immediate independence. Before the referendum, violence occurred in East Timor. The militias in East Timor killed and tortured people in order to intimidate them. In Australia, Dupont and Berign (1999) suggested that the early deployment of the peacekeeping force was needed, However, Downer rejected the proposal. The three agreements finalised on 5 May 1999 and signed by Ali Alatas, Jaime Gama from Portugal as the *du jure* administrative power of East Timor, and Kofi Annan, gave all responsibilities for ensuring security for the East Timorese to the Indonesian authorities (Maley, 2000, pp. 70-71).

On 11 June 1999, the UNSC passed Resolution 1246 to establish the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) to "organise and conduct a popular consultation" (United Nations Security Council, 1999a). Against the violence instigated by the pro-

Indonesian militias, the referendum finally took place on 30 August 1999. The vast majority of the East Timorese 78.5% rejected the autonomy option (Martin, 2001, p. 11).

The pro-Indonesian militias began their violent campaign against the population. Overall, approximately 400,000 people fled their houses; 250,000 people were forced to evacuate to West Timor. Many towns were razed; and infrastructure in Dili and other major cities were largely destroyed (Federer, 2005, p. 64; Greenlees & Garran, 2002, p. 202).

The international and the Australian communities were outraged by the violence in East Timor. The United Nations and Australia were under intense pressure to resolve the humanitarian crisis. Howard told Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, that Australia would provide the largest contribution to the peacekeeping force and expected to lead such force (Howard, 2011 p. 345). However, it was obvious that Australia could not conduct the operation unilaterally.

Surin Pitsuwan (2013, p. 128), former Thai Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1999, observed that Australia did not want to be entrapped in East Timor like the United States' entrapment in Vietnam. Moreover, according to Surin (Pitsuwan, 2014), Australia understood that Indonesia has a strong of anti-Western sentiment due to its history of colonialism. Worse, Indonesia also believed that Australia had not remained neutral before and during the referendum. Habibie frankly told Surin that he wanted to see a large number of Asian troops in East Timor and a Nordic or Asian military officer as the commander of the international force (Pitsuwan, 2002). With many factors combined, it was impossible for Australia to intervene without cooperation and support from Indonesia's neighbouring countries. Howard contacted many global and regional leaders, one of whom was the Thai Prime Minister, Chuan Leekpai.

In Thailand, the Chuan government was the first government in Thailand's history that embraced democratic promotion and human rights in its foreign policy delivered to the Parliament (The Royal Thai Government, 1997, p. 139). He had his own policy to encourage the Royal Thai Armed Forces to participate in peacekeeping operations in order to bolster Thailand's profile as a good international citizen. When he was requested by Howard and Annan, he decided that Thailand would contribute to the international force (Pitsuwan, 2014).

From 10-13 September 1999, the APEC Summit was held in Auckland, New Zealand. It was an opportunity for the international community to pressure Indonesia to accept an international force to stop the humanitarian crisis in East Timor. The Indonesian government could not stand pressure from the international community and accepted a peacekeeping force authorised by the United Nations Security Council. On 15 September 1999, the Security Council passed Resolution 1264 to establish a multinational force to restore peace and security and support UNAMET missions and to authorise the participating state to take all necessary means to conduct the operations (United Nations Security Council, 1999b).

Furthermore, Thailand also utilised its strong relationship with Japan to seek its financial contribution. Surin insisted that, due to the Asian financial crisis, Thailand

and other ASEAN countries contributing to the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) did not afford sufficient financial resource to conduct the operation. Surin turned to Japan for assistance. Surin and the Filipino Secretary of State talked to Satoh Yukio, the permanent representative of Japan to the United Nations in September 1999 (Er, 2010, pp. 46-47). Surin and the staff of Ambassador Yukio calculated the cost and found that US\$ 50 million was needed. Ambassador Yukio asked Tokyo for US\$ 100 million for the trust fund, and his request was approved within 24 hours.

The fund provided by Japan enabled Thailand and the Philippines to take part in the INTERFET. As Er (2010, p. 47) observed, Japan's financial contribution was "extended not only to East Timor but also to ensure the viability of ASEAN as a regional institution." Walton (2004, p. 244) suggested that Japan was more comfortable to respond to the request by friendly Southeast Asian nations, not to overt pressure by Australia.

Politically and diplomatically, Australia's leading roles in East Timor were significant because no ASEAN countries had sufficient experience, capabilities or intention to lead a multinational peacekeeping force in East Timor. When Australia decided to lead the force, other ASEAN countries including Thailand were willing to follow. John Blaxland (2002, p. 7), former Australian Defence Attaché to Thailand, observed "without Australia taking the lead, the others [other ASEAN nations] would not have participated." Simply put, the roles of Australia leading to inspired ASEAN countries including Thailand to participate in the operations.

On the other hand, Thailand's status as an Asian and an Indonesia's ASEAN fellow country helped legitimise Australia's leading roles in East Timor. It made the intervention possible and achievable for Australia as it to some extent complied with Indonesia's request for the presence of Asian and ASEAN components in INTERFET. According to Blaxland (2014), Thailand's contribution helped legitimise Australia's leading roles and satisfy Indonesia. Moreover, Thailand could also make use of its strong relationship with Japan to secure its financial contribution for the operations which Australia had not been able to do so despite Australia's continuous pressure on Japan.

At the operational level, on the Australian side, Major-General Peter Cosgrove (retired as General and is the current Governor-General of Australia), was appointed the Commander of INTERFET. Australian troops arrived in East Timor on 20 September 1999. Australians were responsible for the western part of East Timor from North to South, including Dili, its capital city. Australia thought that it would be strategically beneficial for INTERFET if Australia and New Zealand worked seamlessly in the Western part of East Timor from Dili, Liquica to Maliana and Suai (Barrie, 2014). Their main duties were to disarm militias and secure the border with West Timor. Australia assigned Asian countries including Thailand to be responsible for the Eastern part of East Timor. Songkitti negotiated with Australia and expressed Thailand's intention to be responsible for relatively more benign areas in Bacau and Viqueque because as Songkitti (Jaggabatar, 2013), explained, Thailand wished to avoid confrontation with the Indonesian security forces and militias and Thailand could make use of its expertise in development to assist local people to get on with their normal lives.



By the end of 1999, after INTERFET could effectively control East Timor, the Australian government urged the United Nations to take over the mission from INTERFET. Australia thought it was time for ASEAN countries to take the lead in the United Nations peacekeeping force because Australia wished to send a clear message that Australia did not want to colonise East Timor (Blaxland, 2014). On 25 October 1999, the Security Council passed Resolution 1272 to establish the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) to facilitate the transition to independence of East Timor (United Nations Security Council, 1999c).

Australia and Thailand continued to work together in the UNTAET peacekeeping force. The force took over from the INTERFET on 23 February 2000. The first commander was Lieutenant General Jaime de los Santos from the Philippines. The term of de los Santos ended in July 2000. He was succeeded by Lieutenant General Boonsrang Niumpradit from Thailand until 31 August 2001. The two deputy commanders were Australian army officers: Major-General Michael Smith and Major-General Roger Powell respectively. Smith assisted Boonsrang in negotiations with Indonesia, planning strategic operations against militias and visiting each country's contingents in various parts of East Timor (Smith, 2014). Powell had experience in military training, so apart from his mission as the deputy of Boonsrang, he was also responsible for training local security forces in East Timor and how to separate power between the police forces, military forces and the civilian authorities at the district level in East Timor (Powell, 2014).

Thai military officers in East Timor in INTERFET and UNTAET complemented Australian officers by sharing at least three qualifications and skills. Firstly, they were able to get along with the military officers from other countries and local population well. Colonel Noppadol Charoenporn (retired as General), the commander of Thai troops during INTERFET (2013) claimed that Thai soldiers in Bacau and Viqueque did not have to hold the guns in their hands when patrolling around the villages because Thai army officers always smiled at and greeted the local people in order to gain their trust and co-operation.

During UNTAET, when Boonsrang was appointed the Commander of the UNTAET PKF, he was able to create the environment in which troops from different countries including Australia and Thailand could work together better. According to Smith and Dee (Smith & Dee, 2003, p. 72), under Boonsrang's leadership, "the force became more closely knit". Powell (2014) praised Boonsrang for his empathy for each individual staff and his ability to draw out everybody's strengths. Coming from a non-English speaking country, Boonsrang realised that there could have been problems in communication between nations, so he asked military officers from every country at the morning briefing on his first day as the commander, 22 July 2000, to speak with one another slowly and clearly (Niumpradit, 2004, p. 4). This clearly showed Boonsrang's sensitivity towards encouraging teamwork between troops from different nations. Powell (2014) recalled that one of the strategies of Boonsrang to build stronger relationships between his staff and between the local communities was to invite them to have Thai food with him every Friday night and thought them how to cook Thai food. Thai food became one of Boonsrang's effective tools to connect people from different cultures and languages in East Timor.

Secondly, Thai troops followed his Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej's footsteps in improving the agricultural skills of the local population. When Thailand faced the communist threat during the Cold War, King Bhumibol led the nation to fight communism by initiating development projects around the country, especially in the North East. He insisted that alleviating poverty and improving people's livelihoods were the best ways to reduce support for communist insurgent (Grossman & Faulder, 2011, p. 247).

Colonel Pichate Wisajorn (retired as General) (2014), the commander of the second Thai contingent deployed to East Timor under UNTAET, who started agricultural development projects, explained that it was King Bhumibhol who assigned this development task to soldiers to help local people to improve agriculture. Strategically, it was a way to garner support from local people because they would then feel that soldiers were their friends. This could also help to prevent the enemies from mobilising them. Pichate wished to apply King Bhumibhol's security doctrine in East Timor. He thought peace would not be restored if people were still starving. He took thousands of walking catfish from Thailand to East Timor. He also thought the condition of soil and lands of East Timor were not appropriate for agriculture because during the occupation by Indonesia, chemical fertiliser had been heavily used. He decided to teach the East Timorese to produce high quality organic fertiliser by applying a technique called "Effective Microorganism (EM)". Pichate also taught the East Timorese to dig a pond and to cover it with plastic bag and fill it with water to breed walking catfish to be highly nutritious food for the people. Moreover, he taught the East Timorese how to use buffaloes and ploughs to plough the rice fields, which is more effective than the traditional way in which people whipped horses tied to a pole in the middle of the rice field to make them run and step on the soil.

The last qualification and skill was profound understanding of the way of life and the mentality of the East Timorese which is similar to that of people in the countryside of Thailand. This was one of Boonsrang's outstanding abilities as the UNTAET PKF Commander because he grew up in the rural area. The first significant step was ensuring the positive attitude of military officers in the field towards local people. Boonsrang argued that "if the multinational force conducting operations in East Timor did not believe that the East Timorese people were good, they would not commit to working for them wholeheartedly, and it would be difficult to be successful" (Malikaew, 2012, p. 61).

Some foreign troops, especially those from Western countries, observed that the East Timorese children were prone to violence when they saw the children playing toys which looked like guns made of bamboo. They also soaked paper and moulded it into circular shapes to use as fake bullets (Malikaew, 2012, p. 53). Moreover, the East Timorese children often fought against one another and loved cockfighting. Boonsrang needed to explain to the western peacekeepers that because of the poverty, the East Timorese children could not afford expensive modern toys, so they needed to create their own toys from natural materials available locally or sometimes fought against one another.

The fact that the qualifications and skills of Australian and Thai troops were complementary led to the success of the peacekeeping operations in East Timor. While Australian troops focused on securing the western part of East Timor and

strategic operations against the militia, Thai troops were successful in engaging with the local population, uplifting their quality of life and influencing some foreign troops to adopt more positive attitudes towards the East Timorese, based on their profound understanding of their lives and mentality.

## **Conclusion**

When Indonesia invaded East Timor in 1975, Australia and Thailand supported Indonesia's action and tried to prevent the issue from being discussed in international organisations. However, the new Indonesian president announced the referendum on the status of East Timor to be held. After the majority of the East Timorese voted for independence, violence erupted in the territory. Australia and Thailand worked together politically, diplomatically and militarily as strategic partners in INTERFET and later UNTAET. While Australia provided leadership in the operations, Thailand helped legitimise Australia's leading roles and to satisfy Indonesia. Thailand's strong relationship with Japan also helped to convince it to provide substantial financial contribution to the operations. At the operational level, while Australian troops were responsible for fighting against militias along the border with West Timor, Thai troops were responsible for the more relatively benign areas of Bacau and Viqueque in the eastern part of East Timor, so they could utilise their expertise in winning hearts and minds of the local people and in integrating development with security. That Thai troops were able to get along with local people well, to develop agricultural skills of the East Timorese, to influence some Western peacekeepers to adopt more positive attitudes towards the East Timorese due to profound understanding of their lifestyles and mentality led to the success of the peacekeeping operations in East Timor.

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