Chapter 6

Conclusion: East Timor and the Characteristics of Crisis Policymaking

Influence of the East Timor Crisis

The East Timor crisis had broad effects at many levels. At the global level, the international response to the crisis gave some reason to hope (at the time) that the United Nations could become an effective body for maintaining international order. At the regional level, this crisis changed a range of relationships, particularly those between Indonesia, Australia, the new nation-state of East Timor and their neighbours. Without overstating the effect, the crisis began a new and different period in Australian politics where policy was more self-confident, increasingly interventionalist within the region and even more closely aligned to the United States. The crisis itself also created a major disruption in the Australian–Indonesian relationship that was to last for around six years. The intervention into East Timor further showed the need to reconsider Australia's defence policy after a long period dominated by the Defence of Australia concept.[1] These implications make studying the East Timor crisis especially worthwhile because Australia's strategic environment continues to change in response to broad systemic forces and local problems and issues. The likelihood of new crises emerging in Australia's region makes it essential for the Australian Government to learn from its experience.

The crisis also brought change to four significant areas of policymaking in Australia. First, the East Timor crisis had a significant effect on the structure of national security policymaking. At the beginning of 1999, the linkage between the National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSCC), the Secretaries Committee on National Security (SCNS) and the Strategic Policy Coordination Group (SPCG) was a reasonably strong and well-established one. Indeed, as Peter Briggs pointed out, the linkages were well practised by the end of 1998. However, a different crisis management model emerged in 1999 that saw no real role for

---

1   In simple terms, the 'Defence of Australia' concept stresses defence of the sea-air gap to Australia's north and emphasises the importance of maintaining self-reliant forces to protect Australian territory. It provides an alternative to a 'forward defence' posture that involves basing outside Australia (mainly in Southeast Asia) and force structure priorities that emphasise coalition operations. For a discussion, see Michael Evans, *From Deakin to Dibb: The Army and the Making of Australian Strategy in the 20th Century*, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Duntroon, Canberra, 2001, pp. 17–33.

SCNS—one of the main elements of the formal national security policymaking structure—in the crisis' acute phase, because the overlap in membership between the senior committees and the fast pace of events made SCNS redundant. Its place was taken by the NSCC, which was supported instead by the *ad hoc* Taylor Committee. Similar *ad hoc* restructuring occurred in other Departments—most notably in Defence, where two new organisations were created to manage the new, unusual, sensitive and heavy workload created by the role of coalition leader.

Defence was not the only group to change its structures: the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) created a small policy group, and AusAID merged parts of its Humanitarian and Indonesia Sections to manage the issue. The Australian Federal Police (AFP) expanded its existing overseas deployment cell dramatically, and then went through the process of raising groups by thinning its existing forces in Australia and calling on the State police forces to provide officers for the United Nations Mission in East Timor. A few years later, the AFP formed an entirely new body, to be called the International Deployment Group, to allow them to respond to similar situations. Of course, others did little to change because they had existing groups to manage their input into this type of activity. For example, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) was able to manage most of its contribution through its Overseas Elections Section. On balance though, the formal structure that existed before 1999 was found wanting in some respects, and the established structure for managing a crisis had to be extensively revamped as the situation became more acute.

The second place where the crisis was felt was in the NSCC because, while its function might not have changed, the East Timor crisis changed its operating mode and role. As a result, the NSCC was no longer a purely political committee, run along the same lines as Cabinet—it became a combined committee of politicians and officials that worked together while retaining their traditional responsibilities. In addition, the increased frequency of meetings effectively altered the NSCC's role from decision, to one of management and decision.

Third, East Timor also influenced the way some policy instruments were conceived. While projecting force into the region was long considered a role for the ADF, this was the first time that Australia had led an expeditionary operation in the region since the Borneo campaigns of 1945. Now Australia was actively considering how it could be the largest contributor to future coalitions within the 'arc of instability', should that prove necessary.[2] The AFP also moved to the fore of potential instruments to enhance foreign policy and

---

2 See Department of Defence, *Defence 2000—Our Future Defence Force*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2000, p. 48. The term 'arc of instability' captured the prevailing thinking on crises and conflict within Australia's near-neighbourhood in the late-1990's—see Paul Dibb, 'Indonesia: the key to Southeast Asia's security', *International Affairs*, 77, no. 4, 2001, pp. 830–31.

national security, because a number of different crises around the world did not involve large military forces and significant firepower. Instead, they involved criminal-like activity that was best countered through the application of police powers. The role of Australia's foreign aid program was also reconceived during this time, and AusAID became more explicitly focused on security and working with other Commonwealth departments.[3] The Australian Government also saw that it had considerable financial resources that it could use to achieve its objectives. Despite this, other instruments conducted business as usual. For example, DFAT's many overseas missions performed their usual job of liaison, communication and persuasion; and the AEC's Overseas Elections Section performed its assistance role once more.

Finally, a number of new security policy issues emerged directly and indirectly from the East Timor crisis. Now the Australian Government needed policy to manage a new state on its doorstep, while having to reconstruct its relationship with Indonesia. Australia also had to become accustomed to a new, dual image in the region where some viewed Australia as a leader at some level, while others saw Australia as an interventionist state that was especially close to the United States.[4] The East Timor crisis also raised questions about Defence spending and Defence policy: indeed, it marked the start of a period where Defence was a major political issue, and the management of 'national security' became a major issue in the next two elections. More broadly, the East Timor crisis, together with the near-contemporaneous conflict in Kosovo, led to significant questions about humanitarian intervention and the role of the United Nations. According to then Foreign Minister of New Zealand Phil Goff, the success of the East Timor intervention had led some to develop unrealistic expectations about the utility of military intervention in the region's other conflicts.[5] Others described a 'responsibility to protect' people in situations where governments cannot or will not'.[6]

This study has devoted considerable effort to developing insights about crisis policymaking and demonstrating how crisis differs from 'typical' instances of policymaking. The next section completes this work by arranging the characteristics identified in previous chapters into a manageable, essential group.

---

3   Interview with Steve Darvill.

4   A perception re-enforced by the 'Deputy Sheriff' article in an Australian news magazine—see Fred Brenchley, 'The Howard Defence Doctrine', *Bulletin* (Australia), 28 September 1999, pp. 22–24).

5   Phil Goff, 'Opening Address', in Bruce Brown (ed.), *East Timor—The Consequences*, New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, Wellington, 2000, p. 15.

6   See Kofi Annan, *Annual Report to the UN General Assembly*, 20 September 1999, available at <http://www.un.org>, accessed 5 October 2007. The new view of responsibility advocated by Annan was articulated in International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect*, International Development Centre, Ottawa, 2001, p. 11.

The Characteristics of Crisis Policymaking

This paper has already discussed some of the shortcomings of the Australian Policy Cycle as a normative or descriptive model for policymaking. However, this cycle has helped to structure the analysis of national security policymaking, and highlight some of the similarities and differences between nominally 'typical' characteristics and the actual conduct of policymaking in this case. These typical characteristics have been modified to reflect the experience of this crisis and are grouped at Table 8 below.

Table 8: The Characteristics of Crisis Policymaking

Phase	Characteristics of Policymaking
Issue Identification	• The prime minister, his national security ministers and their senior officials are the dominant domestic actors in issue identification and, by extension, problem definition.
	• Foreign actors and events (especially governments) have the ability to place issues on the crisis policy agenda when they intend to harm Australian interests, when the interests of Australia's allies and friends are threatened, and when high levels of interdependence mean that threats to others' interests are viewed as threats to Australia.
	• Other domestic actors have a limited ability to identify issues in a crisis.
	• Mass appeal plays a limited role in issue identification.
Policy Analysis	• Where the ability to conduct rational-comprehensive analysis is limited in a crisis, decision-makers turn to trusted sources of advice. This can change both the structure of policymaking and which actors will be influential.
	• Policy issues are rarely analysed as individual, discrete problems, and the nature of competition between issues and interests, and the consequent influence on the issue at hand, makes analysis iterative. Policy insiders dominate.
	• Where dominant frameworks exist, they are likely to be noticeable where there is no clear lead for a crisis.
Policy Instruments	• The instruments most used by the Australian Government in crises are diplomacy, alliances, military force, economic levers (including foreign aid), information, international law, and (sometimes) social levers.
	• The utility of foreign and defence policy instruments is highly situational in a crisis.
Consultation	• All options are used with overseas interlocutors (who are primarily other governments and major international organisations); with information, discussion, partnership and delegation commonly occurring.
	• Consultation between the government and the public usually takes the form of a one-way passage of information.
	• Much consultation occurs in secret.

Coordination	• Governments describe structures and routines that suit their particular preferences and best thinking for the time, the task at hand, and external factors.
	• Coordination is basically collegial, but the potential for conflict should not be ignored.
Decision	• The prime minister is dominant.
	• Cabinet conventions are based on collective responsibility, secrecy, and recorded decisions.
	• Officials, when invited, may remain during all discussion; but, in general, they answer questions of a technical nature and leave the Cabinet room before decisions are taken.
Implementation	• Implementation is considered throughout the policy cycle.
	• The more agencies involved, the more difficult implementation becomes.
Evaluation	• If conducted at all, evaluation typically occurs after the policy has been implemented.
	• Policy advice is not systemically evaluated.

While the 22 characteristics presented here are thorough and suitable for lengthy analysis, this list is not easily used to discuss crisis policymaking under other conditions. These characteristics also overlap in a number of places, and some are more important than others. Refining these 22 points to a smaller group of 5 (identified below) provides a shorthand way to discuss crisis policymaking without compromising the substance of this study.

Dominant executive

The national security executive's dominance of crisis policymaking is evident from its role in issue identification, policy analysis, coordination, consultation and decision. The executive's dominance also allows it to impede or shape evaluation.

The prime minister stands above other ministers in crisis policymaking.[7] Prime ministers maintain this position by using their superior institutional and political resources to provide leadership to the Cabinet, and usually the nation, when a crisis occurs. Of all their political resources, their support in the party room and Parliament's lower house are significant assets. However, their institutional

---

7   This finding provides strong support to a range of other work on Australian foreign policy. For other work that also makes this link, see Peter Edwards, *Prime Ministers and Diplomats: The Making of Australian Foreign Policy 1901–194*9, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983; Russell Trood, 'Prime Ministers and Foreign Policy', in Patrick Weller (ed.), *Menzies to Keating: The Development of Australian Prime Ministership*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic 1992; and Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley, *Making Australian Foreign Polic*y, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 97–102.

resources are more important in time of crisis. They have their own sources of advice and choose the method of decision-making; although they must take care to ensure they can gain Cabinet support on major decisions. Another critical advantage is their role as an information hub. In the tight timeframes of a crisis, where communication channels narrow and discussions with overseas interlocutors are of great import, the prime minister has an exclusive view. The prime minister is also the leader who defines the problem to the public and generally acts as the personification of national interests. These advantages and responsibilities mean that they must receive the best possible level of support during a crisis.

The key national security ministers are also important. But while their sources of information, advice and resources are significant, they rarely secure authority over other departments. For example, the minister of defence may be highly influential when the ADF is employed, but the NSCC is unlikely to approve supporting diplomatic or economic activities without the foreign minister's concurrence or a prime-ministerial directive. At times, the foreign minister may be able to act as the lead in a crisis, as Sir Garfield Barwick did in the early stages of *Konfrontasi*.[8] However, this position is easily lost if the prime minister takes a direct interest or loses confidence in the minister.

Australian leaders normally rely heavily on advice from senior officials and ministerial advisers, despite the occasional instances of unilateral decision-making. Under most conditions, senior officials and advisers are highly influential in issue identification, policy analysis, consultation, coordination and implementation. Some play a discreet part in decisions as well. Trust is an essential part of this relationship—as the East Timor case showed: increasing trust between ministers and their officials changed the operating mode of the NSCC. A number of senior officials involved in this case also referred to their close contacts with others, and the positive effect of these relationships on the smooth functioning of the crisis policymaking system.

Collegial approach

This study showed that the Australian crisis policymaking system tends towards a collegial approach, which supports the analysis of foreign policymaking by Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley.[9] Although interagency conflict occurs, it did not reach the worst excesses of bureaucratic politics during the East Timor

---

8   Barwick's role in the *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) between Indonesia and the nascent Malaysian state is well described in Gary Woodard, *Asian Alternatives: Australia's Vietnam Decision and Lessons on Going to War*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic, 2004, pp. 74–78. This view was supported by Interviewee 060–07, a former senior official in Defence who was serving in External Affairs at the time of *Konfrontasi*.
9   Gyngell and Wesley, *Making Australian Foreign Policy*, p. 32.

crisis. This is because role clarity, political direction, agreed processes, personal relationships and trust served to mitigate or resolve conflicting points of view—most of the time.

This collegiate approach has other effects on policymaking. It, together with the pressures of time and secrecy, makes rational-comprehensive approaches to policymaking less valued. Instead, ministers and senior officials tend to use their experience and intuition to make sense of emerging situations where normal policy processes cannot or do not deliver within their perceived time limitations. This informal analytical process sees mot have worked in the East Timor case, but it also meant that the Australian Government did not fully recognise the importance of some issues or events until it was too late to have real influence.

Secretive and closed system

Crisis policymaking is secretive and closed due to time pressures, the system's competitive nature (that is, between protagonists), and the privileged sources of information used. Those same pressures also impose restrictions about who within government has information about future plans, while the use of sensitive intelligence usually prevents national leaders from releasing some kinds of information during a crisis and for some time after the event. While the lack of transparency gives some people cause for concern,[10] even critics concede that secrecy in national security matters is usually in the public interest.[11]

Central role for external actors

While most domestic actors play peripheral roles in crises, foreign governments and other external actors are usually at the centre. At the start, an external actor usually frames the issue by challenging an existing interest. External actors may also help the government meet a challenge by employing their significant resources, such as military forces or economic assets. Close consultation with allies will be necessary in most crises.

Complicated and complex implementation

The significant range of issues involved in any crisis makes policymaking complicated. Identifying the issues at stake is critical, because this directly bears upon the instruments used and the range of actors involved. This

---

10 Carl Oatley, *Australia's National Security Framework: A Look to the Future*, Australian Defence Studies Centre, University of New South Wales, Canberra, 2000, p. 18; and Bertrand Robert and Chris Lajtha, 'A New Approach to Crisis Management', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2002, pp. 181–83.
11 Warwick Funnell, *Government by Fiat: The Retreat from Responsibility*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2001, p. 190.

increases the importance of having multidisciplinary planning teams and sound written procedures, and of providing opportunities to practice together before a crisis occurs. Such measures will improve the participants' ability to understand the implications of possible events, or anticipate how their policies may be challenged in crises.

The growing number of actors and actions, and reactions among them; the apparent compression of time and space; and the interconnectedness of future national security crises will make implementation increasingly complex.[12] Yet the characteristic of complexity is one that Australian governments have found difficult to manage at times. For example, the failed attempt to create a coordinated counter-subversion plan for Asia in the 1950s shows how difficult it can be to implement effective plans and align departmental efforts.[13]

Seeing order where none exists?

While the Australian Policy Cycle has been used to arrange the discussion of national security policymaking in this crisis, this does not mean that the policy process during 1999 was either controlled or orderly. From the nominal start of the crisis, when Indonesian President B.J. Habibie received Australian Prime Minister John Howard's letter, Australian policymakers were forced to react to event after event—from the Indonesian Cabinet's decision to grant the referendum in January 1999, through to continuing TNI-sponsored violence in East Timor, to the tense time while the international community waited for Habibie to invite the intervention force in September, to the US reluctance to play a major combat role in any intervention and finally to the UN Security Council (UNSC)'s decision to grant a mandate for INTERFET. These actions by external players forced the Australian Government into an essentially reactive posture. Even attempts to be proactive, such as the Bali Summit of late April 1999 or the visit to Indonesia by Air Marshal Doug Riding and Allan Behm in June 1999, seemed unable to exert significant influence on international processes or Indonesian behaviour. As a result, Australia's policy aims changed significantly throughout the year and none of the goals held before March 1999 were still valid or achievable by September of the same year. Further, Australia's modes of consultation had shifted from 'information' and 'partnership' to 'delegation' and even 'control' by September, as policy was essentially reliant upon the willingness of both the UNSC and Habibie to allow the intervention force into East Timor.

---

12   Michael Evans, 'Towards and Australian National Security Strategy: A Conceptual Analysis', *Security Challenge*s, vol. 3, no. 4, 2007, p. 117.
13   Christopher Waters, 'A failure of imagination: R.G. Casey and Australian plans for counter-subversion in Asia, 1954–1956', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1999, pp. 360–63.

This picture of an 'uncontrollable' policy environment and missed objectives could be used to argue that the policy process failed to deliver on the Government's aims. But such a view promotes unrealistic expectations, for it overlooks the 'multiplayer' nature of policymaking in a crisis, and the very real resources that most players can use to achieve their objectives. It also overlooks one aspect of the outcome, in that the East Timorese people expressed their desire for independence and subsequently achieved this aim. Further, Australia and Indonesia avoided serious violence, and long-term harm does not seem to have been caused the bilateral relationship at the time of writing (which are, admittedly, very low benchmarks of success). While the policymaking situation did not unfold as some might have hoped, there was a reasonable degree of effectiveness present throughout. Rather than hold unrealistic ideals, we should expect policymaking during crises to be messy and rely upon significant flexibility. Achieving such flexibility requires a policymaking process built on sound structures, efficient processes and, ultimately, skilled individuals.

This study has identified five main characteristics that should be considered as Australia reviews its structures, processes and capabilities for crisis policymaking. From this, it is clear that Australia's future crisis policymaking system must continue to change in ways that accord with these characteristics, while retaining an ability to respond to new challenges. Such change will be essential because Australia will face more complex crises in the future, and these crises will involve high stakes for its relationships, sovereignty, public safety and the economy. How the Australian Government organises its policymaking system beforehand will be critical to managing the transformative potential of those events. Making the most of pre-crisis opportunities to improve organisation, information sharing, training and ultimately culture will improve the ability of future policymakers to respond effectively to crisis. This is a critical matter for governments to address, and to review periodically to ensure the continued relevance and robustness of Australia's crisis policymaking system.